

SHEILA



S H E I L A

BY

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'ST. VEDA'S,' ETC.



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TO
HER GRACE
THE DUCHESS-DOWAGER OF ATHOL

LADY, I lay these pages at thy feet.
I rit, as thou know'st among the silent hills,
By the swift-flowing stream, whose murmuring
Bears in its tone the music of the past.
And if the record of the young her life,
The heritage of joy, the cross of pain,
By which on earth it is made meet for Heav'n,
Awake in thine a tender mem-ry
Of other days, when that bright radian' light,
The love which is lif's crown, illumined thine,
It is enough: I lay it at thy feet.

ANNIE S. SWAN.

NOTE.

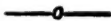
THIS tale has already appeared in serial form under the title of 'Over the Hills and Far Away.' The change has been rendered necessary by the fact that the former title has been copyrighted by another author.

ANNIE S. SWAN.

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SHEILA.

CHAPTER I.

THE LAIRD'S WOOING.

'Might we but share one wild caress,
Ere life's autumnal blossoms fall!'

O. W. HOLMES.



SHEILA, are you ever a moment still? You'll have every spring in mamma's poor old couch broken.'

The reproof was very gently uttered, in a sweet, caressing voice, but the child to whom it was administered felt it to be a reproof, and, desisting from her boisterous gambolling with Tory, her little fox terrier, came close to her mother's side and looked up into her face. They were mother and child, though one would scarcely have imagined it. The mother's golden brown hair was confined under a close widow's cap, but the sweet, somewhat careworn face under it seemed only a girl's. Edith Murray had kept her youth well, though she had been a widow for nearly five years. Her white hand rested lovingly on the child's tumbled brown curls, and she smiled into the large, soft, hazel eyes, so like her own, which were uplifted to her face.

'Well, Sheila, what now?'

'Can Anne take me, mamma, away up the river, Tory and me? I'm so tired staying in the house.'

'Not to-day, darling. Mamma will need you by and by. But you and Tory may go out to the garden for a frolic, only don't let him chew Anne's linen bleaching on the grass.'

'Very well, mamma, thank you. Come, Tory, Tory; oh, you dear, funny little dog!'

She went through the wide open window on to the little lawn like an arrow, Tory tumbling and rolling on the top of her, chewing her sash ribbons and snapping at her toes. They were both babies, and the one enjoyed the fun as much as the other. Sheila Murray, the widow's one child, and therefore boundlessly precious, seemed to bear a charmed life. She was filled with frolic and fun, and was never a moment still from the time the big hazel eyes opened in the morning till the sleepy lids drooped over them at night. But though she had been in perils oft, and had been nearly drowned in the swift Tay more than once, her escapes neither sobered nor frightened her. She did not even know the meaning of fear.

It was not often Edith Murray sat with idle hands, but after child and dog had disappeared through the high privet hedge into the back garden, she sat quite still, looking in the direction they had taken, but her thoughts had not followed them. 'It is for the child's sake,' she whispered to herself after a while. 'And what have I to do with the world, or the world with me?'

It was as if she had been balanced between two opinions, hesitating between two diverging paths, and had suddenly found strength of mind to decide. Her face cleared of its anxious expression, and a kind of sunny brightness seemed to pervade her whole being. But she was feeling nervous, for, in spite of her outward self-control, her hands trembled when she took up the little frock she had been embroidering for her child.

Though still young in years, Edith Murray was old in the experience of life. She was English by birth, and connected with a very old Lincolnshire family. But the branch to which she belonged had been very poor, and when she found herself early orphaned, she had to face the world in her search for daily bread. She had rich and titled relations, but they knew

not the poor, obscure girl who made an appeal for their aid. They advised her to try the usual medium through which teaching appointments are to be got, and washed their hands of her. That bitter sting remained long in Edith Chesney's gentle heart; but she was fortunate beyond others of her class in finding a home and friends among strangers. She left England to become governess in the family of a Scotch baronet, whose residence was in Perthshire, five miles from the ancient and picturesque town of Dunkeld. Sir Douglas Marray himself was a stiff, proud, unyielding man, whom not many loved; but his wife, Lady Ailsa, was one of the sweetest and best of women. Although an earl's daughter herself, she made the friendless orphan feel truly at home in Murrayshaugh, and among her four boy pupils Edith Chesney was very happy. She had not been long an inmate of the house, however, when Alastair Murray, Sir Douglas's brother, a lieutenant in the 93rd Highlanders, fell in love with the sweet, gentle, gracious girl who taught his brother's boys. Of course there was the usual opposition from the bridegroom's family. Not only did they object to the marriage from motives of pride, but also of prudence, for Alastair had not a farthing in the world but his lieutenant's pay. But when did young love ever count pounds, shillings, and pence? They were married, and though barrack life had its drawbacks, and it was no easy task to lay out their meagre income judiciously, they were ridiculous enough to be perfectly happy and contented for a few brief months in Edinburgh Castle, until the gallant 93rd was ordered to the Crimea. Then husband and wife parted, not knowing they should meet no more on earth.

When Edith was ill at Murrayshaugh, and a week-old baby in the cot, the news came home that Lieutenant Alastair Murray had fallen in the trenches before Sebastopol. The poor young widow and her baby-daughter were thus left entirely dependent on the Murrays. Sir Douglas did his duty, as he saw it, but it was done in a spirit which could not fail to wound a sensitive soul.

He gave her one of his own cottages in Birnam, paid her servant's wages, and gave her fifty pounds a year. This, Lady

Ailsa, out of the loving-kindness of her heart, and unknown indeed to her husband, supplemented with many a kind and handsome gift. Sir Douglas regarded his sister-in-law as a burden upon him, and one which ought never to have been laid upon him. But though he gave her of his substance grudgingly, he frowned her down when she had meekly suggested trying to earn her own living, as she had done previous to her marriage.

'Remember, Mrs. Alastair, you are one of "us" now,' he had said, with his haughty head high in the air, and the most unbending severity of look and tone. So poor Mrs. Alastair could only eat meekly of the bread of charity, and how bitter she found it to the taste no one but herself knew. But for her child's love, and the precious kindness of Lady Ailsa, she would have given way to despair. There were times, however, when looking forward she *did* despair. Year by year, as Sheila grew older, expenses were increasing. More cloth was required for the little frocks, and a few shillings more for boots and slippers—and what was to become of the child's future? Mrs. Alastair was a great deal alone, and she brooded over these things perhaps more than she ought. An occasional dinner at Murrayshaugh was her only experience of social life, and though she never failed to impress Lady Ailsa's guests with her sweetness and grace, the idea that any one could be specially interested in her never presented itself to her mind. She believed that she had lived her life, but she had that day received a great surprise—the greatest, indeed, which had ever ruffled the quiet current of her days. She took the letter from her pocket, and read it again for the twentieth time. It was very short, and very much to the point. The concluding sentences appealed to something in her heart she had fancied no power on earth could again awaken. 'You are the only woman I have ever seen who ever cost me a second thought. If you will marry me, I will do my utmost to make you happy. What your answer may mean to me I can scarcely permit myself to think. Madam, I cannot wait for it. I will therefore call to-morrow afternoon to receive it from your own lips.'

Such were the words Edith Murray had read so often that day that they seemed engraven on her heart. Her eyes were fixed upon them when she heard the sharp click of the garden gate and a firm step on the gravelled walk. Then the bell rang, and almost before she could collect her wavering, trembling senses, the visitor was announced.

‘Mr. Graham Macdonald.’

Mrs. Alastair rose hurriedly to her feet, and, with crimson face, extended her hand in greeting.

‘I hope I see you well, madam?’ Macdonald said, with a rugged, old-fashioned courtesy; but his deep, keen, flashing blue eye dwelt on the sweet face as if he sought to read her very soul.

Tall, broad-shouldered, strong of limb and will, was this rugged Highland laird, who had done his wooing in such a rough and ready fashion without any of the preliminaries of courting. He had but seen her twice at Murrayshaugh, but the first time he took her in to dinner he knew that if she would have him he would make her his wife. Macdonald was not handsome, but he had a powerful and not ungraceful figure, a striking if rather stern-looking face, and an honest, flashing eye, which had never feared the face of man. He was a descendant of an old and honourable family, who had at one time held large estates in the far north. But the vicissitudes of war and the fickleness of fortune had wrested these from it. It was only after the rebellion of '45 that Dalmore, in Glenquach, and Findowie, in Strathbraan—the present estates of the Macdonalds—came into the possession of the family. Graham Macdonald was a proud man, and had the reputation of being hard of heart and greedy of gold. But the man had another side—a fine, generous, loveable side—which was now to come to the front. Until love for this woman had touched his being, he had had no experience of the sweeter influences of life. Love was not the less sincere, and even passionate, that it had come to him so late. He was now in his fifty-fifth year. Hasty of action, though somewhat slow of speech, he had risked his happiness on the very slight acquaintance he had with Mrs. Alastair, and now had come in person for

his answer. He did not sit down in her presence, though she begged him to do so. He saw her extreme nervousness—indeed, the fluctuating colour on her face and the downcast, womanly manner might have given him hope—but what did the grim Laird of Dalmore know of women and their ways?

Mrs. Alastair saw that she must speak, for the Laird had not a word to say for himself now he had come for his answer. But while she was trying to find words to open the conversation, they were interrupted by Tory's sharp little bark and the sound of hurrying feet, and the next moment Sheila darted into the room. She was not a shy child, and she rushed at once to the Laird's side and thrust her hand into his pocket.

'Sheila, Sheila! you naughty child,' said Mrs. Alastair reprovingly. 'Run away to Anne.'

Macdonald stooped down and took the child in his strong arms, and instantly her little hands clasped his neck, and she bent upon him the pair of loveliest, most innocent baby eyes he had ever seen.

'Any rock?'

'No, but there's something to buy it with in the pockets you were at just now,' said the Laird, with a smile which Mrs. Alastair thought made his face almost handsome. 'I have just been asking your mamma to come and live at my house, Sheila, you and she, and you would have a pony to ride on, and all sorts of things.'

'We'll go to-morrow,' said Sheila, quite excitedly; 'is it far away?'

'Not very; but see what mamma says. I think she is not quite sure about it,' said Macdonald, finding a fine easy way out of his dilemma. Poor, innocent Sheila! she was quite unconscious what a momentous question she was called upon to decide.

'Oh, mamma always does what I want,' said Sheila, with delightful confidence. 'How soon can we go? To-morrow? Will you take us after breakfast? Anne gives me my porridge at eight, mamma has her coffee at nine. We'll go at ten!'

'Oh, Sheila, Sheila!' Mrs. Alastair rose with crimson face, and rang the bell.

'Take Sheila away, Anne,' she said, when the girl came.
'Keep her with you till I ring.'

So Sheila was ignominiously dismissed, but she had settled the question all the same, and both the Laird and Mrs. Alastair knew it.

Macdonald sat down beside her, and took her soft hand in his. 'You will never regret it, madam,' he said, in his somewhat formal way, 'nor shall Sheila. I owe her a great deal for helping me out of this dilemma.'

So they laughed, and shook hands upon it, and were very happy in a kind of sober fashion, as befitted a pair whose first youth was past.

'Mr. Macdonald,' said Mrs. Alastair, after a little, 'do you think your sister will be quite pleased at this?'

'She may or she may not. Ellen is rather queer,' said the Laird briefly. 'It has suited her to dwell with me since the minister of Meiklemore died, but there was no promise given that Dalmore should be a permanent home. She and the boy shall never want; and even if I do nothing for them, her own portion would be sufficient for his rearing. She talks whiles of making him a minister, but truly I think the lad too manly ever to put on gown and bands.'

'Does she know you are here to-day?'

'No; my business is my own business, and she'll get to know in good time,' said Macdonald grimly. 'You need not be surprised if she pays you a visit soon. That would be the right thing, wouldn't it?'

A slight shadow crossed Edith Murray's fair face.

'I am afraid of Mrs. Macleod. She was very distant and haughty, I thought, the last time I met her at Murrayshaugh,' she said timidly.

'You need not be. Ellen is an ill woman to bide with, I'll admit, but you will not require to bide with her. She shall have a house of her own before you come to Dalmore.'

'I fear she will not bear me any goodwill for her own and her boy's sake,' said Edith Murray, with a sigh. 'I wish I knew whether I am doing right?'

'If you are doing that which your heart tells you, madam,

it is right. And why should *I* not be allowed to choose my wife as Ellen herself chose her husband, and a fine noise there was about that. The minister of Meiklemore was not considered a fit mate for a Macdonald of Dalmore.'

'So I have heard them say; but I should not like to bring dispeace into Dalmore,' said Edith Murray, still anxiously, though Macdonald's hearty manner somewhat reassured her.

'You have made me a happy man this day,' he said, when he rose to go; and certainly he looked it.

'I hope I shall always be able to make you happy,' Edith answered; for her heart warmed to him, he was so honest, and straightforward, and true.

'You will be kind to Sheila?' she interposed, as they parted; though she had no real misgivings about it. And what could Macdonald say but that he would love the child for her dear sake?

As he rode away from the gate of the cottage, a carriage and pair swept over the bridge from Dunkeld. Its occupants were a lady and gentleman, Sir Douglas Murray and his fair wife—Mrs. Alastair's aristocratic kindred. They looked at each other in amazement at sight of Macdonald.

'Can he have been seeing Edith?' Lady Ailsa asked in wonder.

'It looks like it; but you'll hear about it presently,' Sir Douglas answered, in his short way. 'Well, we've ten minutes to make a call, so don't get into an endless gossip.'

'Oh, Douglas, you *are* hard upon me,' laughed his wife, as she sprang lightly from the carriage at her sister-in-law's gate.

Edith Murray saw them come, and wondered in what words she would break to them the event of the day. Gentle though she was by nature, she could not help a slight thrill of pride at the thought that she was the promised wife of a man whose great possessions far exceeded the heritage of the proud Murrays of Murrayshaugh.

'You have had a caller, Mrs. Alastair,' said Sir Douglas, with that slight sarcasm of manner which made him feared of many; 'it is not often Dalmore condescends to make polite calls.'

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Mrs. Alastair sat down suddenly, for she was trembling in every limb. The colour came and went fitfully across her sweet face, as she lifted her eyes with firmness to the face of her husband's brother. He was the head of the family, and it was her duty to acquaint him with the object of Dalmore's visit.

'Mr. Macdonald came to see me to-day, Sir Douglas, on a special errand,' she said quietly and with dignity, though her cheeks and hands were hotly flushed. 'He has done me the honour to ask me to be his wife.'

'Bless my heart and soul!'

Sir Douglas forgot his starched dignity for a moment, and stared in the most profound amazement. 'His wife, Lady of Dalmore and Findowie, Mrs. Alastair? Impossible!'

'It is true, and I have accepted him,' said Mrs. Alastair, with a sad smile; then suddenly she turned to Lady Murray with a quick, sobbing breath. 'Oh, Ailsa, if I have done wrong, forgive me! It is so hard to know what to do! And my position here—oh, I do not wish to seem ungrateful, but I have felt it hard. It will be a home for me and Sheila, and we both need it. We are not afraid to trust ourselves with Macdonald of Dalmore.'

'My poor, dear Edith! I am so glad. Don't cry, my darling, nor tremble so. You have done perfectly right; and oh, I hope you will be happy, dear, and find the happiness you hope for. It will be a great change for you, Edith; and we will all need to bow before the Lady of Dalmore, will we not, Douglas?'

'Lady of Dalmore,' repeated Sir Douglas, as if the words had a charm for him. 'Upon my word, Mrs. Alastair, you have done splendidly. Of course you have done right. No woman in her senses would refuse such a position, and I congratulate you with all my heart.' Sir Douglas was perfectly sincere in what he said, and he looked at his sister-in-law with a new interest and a considerable increase of respect. The penniless widow of his brother and the lady-elect of Dalmore were two different beings. 'We must go, Ailsa, if you wish to get this train,' said Sir Douglas presently; and with renewed congratulations they left her.

'What will Ellen Macleod say, Douglas?' asked Lady Ailsa, as they stepped into the carriage.

'Show her black Macdonald blood,' said Sir Douglas briefly. 'Mrs. Alastair is quite a young woman, and will bring an heir to Dalmore, so Fergus Macleod will be put out.'

Lady Ailsa sighed; she seemed to see trouble ahead.

'Fergus Macleod will have his mother's portion, Douglas,' she said. 'He does not need Dalmore.'

'The mother's portion cannot be much. I don't think there is money among the Macdonalds, and if Ellen Macleod offends Dalmore just now, she and her boy may find themselves badly enough off.'

'She will be certain to do that,' said Lady Ailsa, rather sadly. 'She was almost rude to Mrs. Alastair the last time they all dined at Murrayshaugh. I should think Ellen Macleod could make a great deal of unhappiness if she chose.'

'Well, well, let them fight their own battles,' said Sir Douglas, dismissing the subject. 'If Mrs. Alastair becomes Lady of Dalmore and Findowie, she can afford to snap her fingers at Ellen Macleod.'



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CHAPTER II.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

'O haughty heart, hard girt about with the grim panoply of self.'

DALMORE had a ten miles' ride before him, but he was in no hurry to reach home. The reins lay loosely on the mare's glossy neck, and she took her own time ascending the hill from Birnam. It was a warm, sultry summer night; a haze of heat hung low in the valleys, and made mysterious mist-wreaths along the mountainsides. Here and there the silver crest of a birch tree would peep out weirdly from the hillside, or the tall head of some giant beech or oak would stand out strangely from the sea of mist in the low grounds, but the Laird had no attention for these things. Any one meeting him could have told that he was deeply absorbed in thought, but what these thoughts were it would have been difficult to determine from the expression on his face. It was a strange, striking face; rugged, powerful, suggestive of extraordinary strength of mind and will, but giving but little indication, if any, of the finer feelings which beautify human character. His heavy brows were knit, his mouth set in a grim, stern curve; but in his downcast eyes there shone a curious light, for Graham Macdonald was thinking of the woman he loved. He had met her years ago at Murrayshaugh, where she was governess to the children of Sir

Douglas, and had been drawn to her then, though she was but a girl, and he a man of middle age. But Alastair Murray was before him, and if Dalmore had ever dreamed any sweet dreams of Edith Chesney, her marriage with the younger Murray dispelled it. So he returned to his lonely dwelling on the slope of bleak Crom Creagh, and took up again the routine of his life, but somehow it seemed to possess less of interest or pleasure for him. A few months after Edith Chesney's marriage, the minister of Meiklemore, the husband of Macdonald's only sister, Ellen died suddenly, and left her with one little boy of two years. It seemed the most natural thing in the world that Ellen Macdonald should return to Dalmore, and there she had dwelt in peace and security for three years. What castles she may have built for her own boy we shall learn hereafter. She had not the remotest idea that Lady Murray's governess could even have possessed the slightest interest for her brother. He was not a marrying man, nor one of those who lavished attentions on ladies. He had rather the reputation of being a bore and a misanthrope; therefore Ellen Macleod apprehended no evil. As for imagining that Mrs. Alastair, the Murrays' poor relation, could be a lion in her path, she would have drawn herself up with indignation at the mere suggestion of such a thing. Ellen Macdonald was a proud, haughty, hard-natured woman. How she had stooped to marry the poor minister of Meiklemore, though he was a Macleod of Pitloch, was a mystery not solvable by any who knew her.

The Laird rode slowly, thinking of the woman he had left. Away in the far distance he could see the mist-crowned cap of Crom Creagh, in whose shadow stood the home she would one day brighten with her presence. It needed something to brighten it; it was a house, but no home, and never had been. If Macdonald was morose and unloveable, he had had no early training or sweeter influences to foster the better part of his nature. Grim Highland pride, fierce Highland temper, had been allowed to run rampant among the Macdonalds through every generation. A thought of Ellen came to him as he caught sight of Crom Creagh, and momentarily he set himself straight in the saddle, and tightened

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his hand on the rein. The mare, sensitive to the slightest touch, set off at a brisk canter, and in fifteen minutes passed by the inn at Amulree. The mist was clearing away, and a glorious sunset appearing beyond the solemn shadows of Glenquaich. A red light touched the waters of the loch into a sheet of living fire, and golden shafts lay athwart the surrounding hills. High on a bit of tableland, half way up Crom Creagh, stood Dalmore, sheltered somewhat by a pine wood on either side, but standing out in front a grey, weather-beaten pile, its many turreted windows reflecting the glory of the sunset sky. It was a bleak, exposed situation for a dwelling, more suggestive of a shooting lodge than the mansion pertaining to a great estate, but it was in keeping with the characteristics of the grim race whose heritage it was. They were not beloved in Glenquaich and Strathbraan, and Graham Macdonald was a hard landlord, exacting his dues to the uttermost farthing; a just man, but not generous, that was all that could be said of him. The front windows of Dalmore commanded a fine view: the little hamlet of Amulree, with its picturesque church and winding streams; the beautiful valley of Glenquaich, with Loch Fraochie mirrored like a gem in its bosom; and all around, chain upon chain of heather-clad hills sat in majestic and solemn beauty. They knew no change, whatever strife might fret the minds of men.

The carriage-way to the mansion of Dalmore branched off the public road, crossed the Girron Burn by a rather unsteady-looking wooden bridge, propped up by divot and peat, led through the marshy low ground at the base of Crom Creagh, and finally wound up the steep slope of the hill to the house. A few straggling birches and firs grew on either side, but there was no attempt at ornamentation or effect. It was a bleak, bare, unpromising approach. And yet the place had its own wild beauty: the purple glow of heather bells, the mystery of light and shadows never seen save on Highland hills, and a perfect freedom and solitude, which seemed to bring it near to heaven. The Macdonalds loved their bleak heritage with a deep-rooted, if undemonstrative love, and they would not have exchanged it for any lowland castle or palace.

Graham Macdonald rode slowly up the carriage-way. Once more the mare was allowed to take her own sweet will. She even stopped to take a mouthful of herbage from the bank without being restrained by her master's impatient hand. The house was built on a broad tableland directly under the steep ascent which led to the summit of the mountain. It was a commodious building of solid masonry, with long narrow windows, and a low wide doorway opening out on a sweep of gravel taken from the bed of the mountain streams. The stables and other offices were on the left, and to the right the garden, which, considering its height and exposure, seemed wonderfully productive. The harvest more than sufficed for the need of the simple household at Dalmore.

The Laird dismounted at the stable door, and as he did so, a little lad dressed in the Highland garb, and becoming it well, came bounding with his hoop, and followed by a collie dog, from the front of the house.

'May I get on Mora, Uncle Graham?' he asked, in his clear, childlike tones. 'I have been watching for you. If I had seen you, I would have come to meet you on the road.'

'Too late, my boy,' said the Laird, gently for him, and his eye softened as it dwelt on the boy's sweet, open face. 'Never mind, Fergus; to-morrow you shall have a ride on Mora. Is your mother in the house?'

'Yes, Uncle Graham. She is in the drawing-room, I think. I saw her at the window just now when I was playing. May I go with Lachlan Macrae to get Mora shod, and ride her home?'

'Yes, yes; off you go. See that Colin doesn't chase the sheep. He'll need to be shot, Fergus, if he doesn't stop these tricks of his. I have had two complaints from the Fauld about him.'

'He is a bad dog, Uncle Graham, and I try to teach him. I'll whip him with your whip if he looks at a sheep to-day,' said Fergus sorrowfully, but firmly, as his uncle turned away.

Dalmore entered the house by the kitchen door, and then through a long stone passage to the front hall. Entering the gun-room, he took off his riding boots, and, washing his hands, proceeded as he was up to the drawing-room. His sister was

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there alone, and he had occasion for a private word with her.

The interior of Dalmore was much more imposing and comfortable than its outward aspect promised. The hall itself was not the least handsome and striking feature of the house. It was panelled in oak from basement to ceiling, and the latter was a specimen of the fine carved work of a past age. It had a fire-place which, in these days of crazes for the antique, would be accounted of priceless value. Deer and sheep skins lay here and there on the polished floor, and the walls were adorned with magnificent deer's horns, stag's head, and other trophies of the chase. A broad, shallow flight of steps led up to a porticoed doorway, which opened upon the staircase, also of rich dark polished oak, and uncarpeted. The effect, if somewhat gloomy and bare, had an attraction of its own. The drawing-room was on the first floor—a curious octagon-shaped room, built, indeed, in the tower of Dalmore. It was plainly furnished, and there was no attempt at decoration, and certainly none of those lighter touches of beauty, which flowers and dainty bits of colour can give to a gloomy room. It was occupied by a lady attired in a black gown of a hard material, and a huge black cap utterly out of keeping with the still youthful appearance it disfigured. Her long, white, characteristic hands were busy kitting a tartan sock for her boy; and though she slightly turned her head at the opening of the door, she had no smile of greeting for her brother. A smile was, indeed, seldom seen on the face of Ellen Macleod. She was a handsome, striking-looking woman, with a grace and dignity of bearing which proclaimed her descent; but there was nothing winning or womanly about her. One might almost wonder how she had been persuaded to become a wife. She was a woman who looked always on the gloomy side of life. Young creatures shrank from her; sometimes, God help him! her boy's warm heart was chilled by her coldness. She regarded any demonstration of affection as a pitiable weakness. She looked after the moral and physical well-being of her child in an exemplary manner, but withheld from him that motherly tenderness which is the children's heritage. A woman this with few

womanly attributes or impulses, and whose pride knew no limit. Of these two grim beings who faced each other in that room, the man was the preferable of the two.

'You have been riding?' she said briefly, and without lifting her eyes from her work. She was indeed surprised to see her brother in the drawing-room. When he was indoors, his hours were chiefly spent in the gun-room or in the library, which was filled with books he never read.

'Yes; I have been to Birnam and back since luncheon,' he answered; and, approaching the window where she sat, he stood directly opposite to her. She slightly elevated her eyebrows, but continued her work.

'Will you give me your attention for a few minutes, Ellen, if you please?'

'Certainly, Macdonald,' she answered, and, folding up her work methodically, laid it on the small inlaid table at her side, and lifted her calm eyes to his face. They were beautiful eyes—large, dark, and piercing—but they lacked that luminous light which a tender woman's heart can give to less expressive orbs.

Graham Macdonald was no coward, but he felt a trifle disconcerted under that calm, steady gaze. He knew perfectly well that she had not the remotest idea of the nature of the communication he was about to make, and it was impossible to expect that it would not give her a shock of an unpleasant kind.

'I have something very particular to talk to you about, Ellen,' he began. 'It concerns myself directly, and more indirectly you and your boy.'

'Indeed!'

Ellen Macleod started slightly. She had felt herself very secure in Dalmore, and, in point of fact, regarded herself as the mother of its future laird.

'I trust, Macdonald, that you have no fault to find with me or with Fergus?' she said quietly. 'I have endeavoured to do my duty in the house, and the child is as good as one of his years can be expected.'

'It is nothing of that kind, Ellen. How can I have any fault to find with you? And I love the boy, as you know,' said Macdonald hastily. 'I only ask you to look back for a

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'What are you talking about, Macdonald?' asked Ellen Macleod, betrayed into more hastiness of speech than usual. 'What do you mean?'

'What I say. I am only reminding you, that when you came back to Dalmore three years ago, there was no promise given that it should be to you or the boy a permanent home.'

'Then you wish me to leave my father's house?' said Ellen Macleod, with quivering lip. 'Fergus and I have been too long a burden on you, perhaps; but we were unconscious offenders.'

'Don't be a fool, Ellen,' said Macdonald hastily. 'It is impossible you can misunderstand me. You have been no burden on me, nor have you given offence in any way, but I am going to marry, and it is impossible there can be two mistresses in Dalmore.'

'Marry!' The word fell short, sharp—almost like a gasp—from Ellen Macleod's lips. In all her planning and dreaming, such a contingency as this had never presented itself to her mind. It was a moment before she recovered herself, for she had received a shock of no ordinary kind.

'Excuse me, Macdonald, if I am lax in offering my congratulations,' she said at length, with a slight, chill smile. 'The magnitude of my surprise is my excuse. Pray, who is the lady to whom you have offered your hand and heart?'

Graham Macdonald did not like her tone, and his colour rose. There was not much love between the two, but the blame was wholly hers. She had done nothing all her life to conciliate or win her brother's heart. Nay, she had taught him a mistrust and dislike of women which had soured him in his young manhood, and made him a morose and melancholy man.

'Spare me your sneers, Ellen, though they are not unexpected,' he said quickly. 'I do not admit your right to question me about my affairs. The fact that I am to marry might be sufficient. The lady who has done me the unspeakable honour to accept me in all my unworthiness is Edith Murray,

whom you may perhaps remember as governess at Murrays-haugh.'

Ellen Macleod started as if she had been stung. Hot, bitter words rushed to her lips, but she restrained them, and even kept that cold smile steadily in her face.

'Lady Ailsa's English governess has indeed feathered her nest in Scotland,' she said slowly. 'Not content with her position as widow of a Murray of Murrayshaugh, she has played and won Dalmore. She must be a clever woman, in spite of her baby face and innocent ways.'

Ellen Macleod was very angry. Her passion was at fever heat, or she would not so far have forgotten herself. As her anger rose, however, her brother's cooled, and he looked at her with a touch of compassion.

'My news has angered you, Ellen, and I forgive what you say about my future wife; only, I beg of you, whatever you may think, in future to spare me the expression of your opinion. I suppose I have come to years of discretion, and may be permitted to please myself in this matter. I have told you in good time, for only this day did I receive my answer. You cannot accuse me of keeping you long in the dark regarding my plans.'

'I thank you for that courtesy, Macdonald,' said Ellen Macleod briefly. 'Unless the marriage is to take place immediately, I shall have time to make my plans. As you say, there cannot be two mistresses in Dalmore.'

'There need be no haste, Ellen,' said Macdonald. 'Do not think I shall lose all interest in you and the boy. You will, at least, remain until the new mistress comes home?'

'I think not, Macdonald; it would scarcely be pleasant for her or for me,' was the cold response.

'The marriage will not take place immediately,' said Macdonald, after a pause. 'I hope, before the time, that you and she may have better acquaintance of each other. You will accompany me at an early day, Ellen, to Birnam, will you not?'

Ellen Macleod's colour rose, and her eyes flashed ominously.

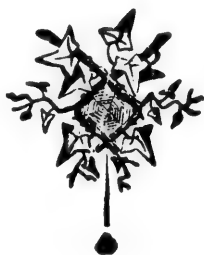
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husband's death, Macdonald, I am not bound to humour your whims, or humiliate myself to please you,' she said, with bitter scorn. 'This woman you have chosen is not a fit wife for you, and I must decline to countenance the affair, or to receive her.'

So saying, she gathered her heavy skirts in her hand, and swept out of the room.





CHAPTER III.

LADY AILSA'S OPINION.

'Oh, sweet is sympathy; and woman's heart
Should be its fittest home.'



HAVE just come over, Edith, my dear, to have a long chat with you about everything,' said Lady Ailsa Murray to her sister-in-law. 'Douglas is at Perth to-day, and I shall wait with you until his train is due. How are you? Sheila is not with me, my love, because I knew that if I brought her, you would have eyes and ears for nobody else.'

'I have missed her very much, Ailsa,' said Mrs. Alastair. 'You, with your merry band, cannot understand the feelings of a mother who has only one ewe-lamb.'

'Oh, but I do! If you saw Sheila, Edith, among those six wild boys! She is like a little angel. In spite of my merry band, I envy you your one ewe-lamb, because she is a girlie. What if we keep her? You will not need her badly at Dalmore?'

'Perhaps more than here, Ailsa,' said Mrs. Alastair, with a sigh.

'Why that long face, child? You are not regretting having given your promise to Dalmore?'

'O no!' The delicate colour rose swiftly to the young

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widow's pale face. 'If you only knew, if I could only tell you, how kind and good he is, Ailsa. I feel that I can never repay him for it all.'

'I should not have thought Dalmore would make such a lover, Edith,' said Lady Ailsa, with a laugh. 'I have always been rather afraid of him.'

'You do not know him,' said Mrs. Alastair, and turned her head a little away.

'I suppose Ellen Macleod has never come?'

'No; she will not receive me, Ailsa.'

'Abominable of her! but nobody could expect anything else from her. It passes my comprehension how any man ever had the courage to make her his wife. I daresay she wore poor Edgar Macleod out,' said Lady Ailsa calmly. 'She will leave Dalmore, I suppose?'

'O yes. There is a little lodge at Amulree—Shonnen, I think, is the name—which has been a kind of home for the ladies of the family. It belongs to her, so she and her boy are to take up their abode in it.'

'Amulree!' exclaimed Lady Ailsa, shaking her head. 'Too near, my dear, far too near. I should like the breadth of the sea between you and Ellen Macleod.'

'You must not be too hard on her, Ailsa. Her hopes are all quenched. This *must* have been a blow to her; and yet, and yet, if she were a true sister, she would not grudge her brother his happiness.'

'It is for the boy, I suppose,' said Lady Ailsa musingly. 'There is not much chance now of his inheriting Dalmore and Findowie. He is a fine little fellow. Have you ever seen him?'

'No; but Macdonald speaks a great deal of him. He has a warm place in his uncle's heart.'

'So Ellen Macleod has put up her Highland temper and her Highland pride,' said Lady Ailsa. 'Never mind her, my dear; the only thing you can do is to ignore her.'

'I wrote to her, Ailsa, but she returned me my letter unopened,' said Mrs. Alastair, with flushing face.

'Insulting woman! and in spite of all that, she deigns to remain at Dalmore!'

'I did not tell Macdonald of it, Ailsa, as I am afraid—he is so sensitive where I am concerned—that he would have sent her away.'

'Well, well, don't let us speak about her any more. When is the marriage likely to take place?'

'The date is fixed,' returned Mrs. Alastair shyly; 'the twenty-first of September.'

'And this is the ninth of August, child. There is no time to prepare. Of course you know the wedding will take place at Murrayshaugh?'

'We talked of being married in Edinburgh, Ailsa. This is such a prying, gossiping place.'

'Let them pry and gossip,' laughed Lady Ailsa. 'It can be as quiet as you like, but it shall be at Murrayshaugh and nowhere else. You can tell Macdonald that, with my kind compliments. Since you are going to cast off the Murrays, it must be done gracefully; and Ellen Macleod shall see that she stands alone in her senseless disapproval of the wisest step her brother ever took in his life.'

'Cast off the Murrays!' repeated Mrs. Alastair, and her tears rose. 'If I ever forget what you have been to me, Ailsa, since the first day I entered Murrayshaugh, a nameless dependent, may I suffer for it!'

'Hush, my darling! we have made you suffer too. My heart has been sore against my husband often on your account. Many times has he made the wound I could never heal. It is an unspeakable source of gratitude to me that at last you will be able to hold your own against us with all our pride. This marriage is a perfect joy to me, Edith, and all the Ellen Macleods in the world won't damp it.'

Both were agitated, and there were traces of it in their looks and manner, when the servant announced Mr. Macdonald.

Lady Ailsa sprang up, brushed away her tears, and was ready to meet the Laird with a smile. As he entered the room she could not but be struck by his noble bearing, and note the exquisite softening which a woman's sweet influence had given to his hard face. She saw the light in his eyes as they dwelt on Edith's face, and her heart was content, for she

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knew that it was the love of a life her gentle sister-in-law had won—a love which would shield and cherish her from the blasts of life. Love had indeed wrought a marvellous change in Macdonald of Dalmore.

‘What little bird whispered to you that Edith and I were talking about you?’ laughed Lady Ailsa in her happy way. ‘I do not suppose that you will care for anything so conventional as congratulations. Nevertheless, I do congratulate you, and I have known Edith much longer than you. You have won a prize, sir, which I fear we Murrays have not sufficiently appreciated.’

She spoke lightly, but with an undercurrent of earnestness which Graham Macdonald deeply felt.

‘I thank you, Lady Ailsa. I pray I may be worthy of it,’ he said, with a courtesy and grace which became him well.

‘I have no fear for your happiness. Good-bye, Edith, darling. She will tell you what we have been talking about. No, I will not stay;’ and almost before they could detain her, the warm-hearted lady of Murrayshaugh had flitted out of the room.

‘Is Farquhar in your kitchen, Anne?’ she asked Mrs. Alastair’s maid, as she met her in the stair.

‘No, my lady; he has gone over to the hotel to put up the horses.’

‘Ah, just run over and tell him to bring back the carriage, as I am going farther on. I shall wait in the dining-room till he comes,’ said Lady Ailsa, who had conceived a sudden plan. She was impulsive by nature, but the promptings of her heart were always in the right direction.

‘Have we time, Farquhar, to drive to Dalmore and be back in time for Sir Douglas’s train?’

‘Dalmore, my lady?’ asked the servant in surprise.

‘Dalmore, above Amulree—you know it?’

‘O yes, my lady, I know it; it is ten miles from here. No, there is not time; it will take us three hours at least.’

‘Ah, then, Lachlan can walk back to Murrayshaugh, and bring a dogcart for Sir Douglas; Anne will tell him. Drive me up to Dalmore.’

There was nothing for Farquhar but to obey, though he felt himself aggrieved by this sudden and unexpected order. It was a long, toilsome road to Dalmore, and a cold, wet drizzle was beginning to blow in the easterly wind. Mr. Farquhar's imperturbable countenance wore a shade of anxious gloom as he turned his horses' heads up the hilly ascent.

Lady Ailsa contemplated an errand of mercy. She wished to reason with, and, if possible, to conciliate Ellen Macleod, whom she had known since her girlhood, though she had not seen much of her for some years. But she knew the nature of Mrs. Alastair, and that the thought that Ellen Macleod regarded her with aversion and anger would eat the happiness out of her heart.

Farquhar was in no very good mood when he got his horses up the steep carriage-way to Dalmore. He was an old and privileged servant, and sometimes spoke his mind with curious candour.

'Just look at the poor brutes, my lady,' he said, pointing to their foam-flaked flanks. 'That road's enough to kill them. How folks can live in a wilderness like this, and expect other people's horseflesh to pull up their mountains, I don't know.'

'You make idols of the horses, Farquhar,' said Lady Ailsa good-naturedly. 'Take them into the stables and feed them well. I shall stay tea with Mrs. Macleod while I am here.'

Ellen Macleod had seen the carriage mounting the hill, and recognised the grey horses, but scarcely expected to see Lady Ailsa alone. She had made up her mind that 'that woman,' as she termed Mrs. Alastair, had come to assert her right to be received at Dalmore. Dear me! how uncharitable one woman can be to another when jealousy and anger are allowed to gain the mastery. Lady Ailsa perfectly divined her thoughts, and smiled as she shook hands with her.

'No, I have not brought poor Mrs. Alastair to take you by storm, Ellen,' she said, with that sweet daring which characterized her at times. 'I am not such an arch-plotter. Will you give me a cup of tea, and let me rest a little with you while

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It was impossible not to feel the charm of that bright presence, and Ellen Macleod's grim face relaxed.

'I am very glad to see you, Lady Ailsa. Few women folk visit me here,' she said graciously, as she laid her hand on the bell-rope.

'Your own fault, Ellen Macleod. People won't visit without invitations,' said Lady Ailsa candidly. 'Why do you mew yourself up in this dull place; and oh, *why* do you wear that hideous thing on your head? It quite disfigures you. Have you ever noticed what a dainty thing Mrs. Alastair wears?—'

Lady Ailsa stopped abruptly. She had made a mistake, as was evidenced by the slow, bitter smile which curled Ellen Macleod's lip.

'I have not a like desire with Mrs. Alastair to make myself attractive in the eyes of men,' she said quietly.

'What horrid things you say, Ellen Macleod! I declare you are not one bit better than you used to be as a girl. Was there no grace in the manse of Meiklemore?'

Ellen Macleod held her tongue, and stirred up the newly-lighted fire to a brighter blaze.

'Do sit down, Ellen, and let us talk,' said Lady Ailsa, feeling that she was making very little headway. 'I am an old friend; you can trust me, and I will be true. I have come to-day to plead Mrs. Alastair's cause.'

Ellen Macleod sat down; a red spot burned on her cheek, and her lips compressed themselves together.

'I would rather not speak of Mrs. Alastair, Ailsa, if you please.'

'But, Ellen, you must speak of her. If you go on brooding over this thing it will eat your heart out. Let us turn it inside out, and see the good as well as the ill in it. Confess, now, that it has made a wonderful improvement in your brother.'

'I have not noticed it. He has been little at home since this transpired. There are no fools like old ones, Lady Ailsa, and a middle-aged lover is generally a sorry spectacle. I am sorry

to see Macdonald making himself a laughing-stock,' was the sour reply.

'How hard you are upon him,' said Lady Ailsa gently. 'Love makes us all a little foolish. I saw Macdonald to-day at Mrs. Alastair's, and I never admired him before, Ellen. In fact, I have been rather sorry for Edith; you Macdonalds are rather a fearsome race, you know.'

'Not fearsome enough to frighten *her*,' said Ellen Macleod, with grim irony; which Lady Ailsa passed over, so eager was she to make peace in Dalmore.

She leaned forward in her chair, with her fair white hands clasped on her knees, and fixed her soft blue eyes earnestly on the dark, forbidding face opposite.

'Ellen, all you can do now will not put Macdonald past his purpose. Would it not be better to accept the inevitable gracefully, and do what you can to further his happiness? I am certain this marriage will be for his happiness. Edith is a dear woman. I am sure you will learn to love her. Don't be the only shadow on the happiness of Dalmore.'

Ellen Macleod never spoke, nor did her countenance relax in the least. She fancied herself deeply injured, and her anger burned causelessly against the inoffensive woman who had supplanted her. She was a proud, hard, jealous-minded woman, and Lady Ailsa's gentle pleading fell with very little effect on her ears.

'Macdonald is his own enemy, Lady Ailsa. He has not calculated what expense and extravagance this step will lead him into. He will find a wife and family a very different matter to provide for from what it is at present. I have saved money for him, and Heaven knows—what with grumbling, ill-conditioned tenants, who shirk their rent paying, and these hard times—there is need for retrenchment somewhere. The revenues of Dalmore and Findowie combined would not suffice to keep up an extravagant establishment.'

'Mrs. Alastair will be more likely to diminish than increase the household expenditure. Her way of life since her marriage—indeed, all her life—has taught her strict economy,' said Lady Ailsa, with a slight sigh, for her heart was heavier than it had

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been when she started on her mission. 'I assure you, you are imagining troubles and ills which will never come. Do be persuaded to make the best of this, Ellen. Go down some day and see Mrs. Alastair. Were I you, my pride would make me do it.'

Ellen Macleod's face grew yet more grim with the sternness of a settled purpose.

'I have passed my word. I do *not* approve of this foolish marriage; and I cannot think her a woman of principle or feeling. I will *not* humble myself to her. If she becomes Lady of Dalmore she can afford to despise me, and will probably; so you must leave us alone, Lady Ailsa.'

At that moment the door was thrown open, and little Fergus, his fair face flushed with out-door exercise, and his tangled yellow hair tossing on his open brow, came bounding into the room, with a wet and muddy collie at his heels.

'Oh, mamma, there is a carriage in the yard!' he cried, but stopped short at the sight of the strange lady at the hearth.

Lady Ailsa's motherly heart warmed to the bright-faced lad, and she stretched out her hands to him with a smile. But the lad drew back with a shyness quite unusual with him, and kept close by his mother's side. Lady Ailsa saw the mother's bosom heave as her full eye fell on the childish figure at her side.

'Mamma,' said Fergus, in a whisper perfectly audible through the whole room, 'is that the lady who is to put us out of Dalmore?'

Ellen Macleod's colour rose.

'That is Lady Ailsa Murray, Fergus. Make your bow to her, and then take Colin downstairs. Don't you see he is fitter for the stable than the drawing-room? How often have I told you not to bring the dogs into the house?'

'Uncle Graham said I might have Colin in, mamma,' said the boy; and, with a graceful salutation to Lady Ailsa, he left the room.

'I must apologise for Fergus's hasty speech, Ailsa,' said Ellen Macleod, as she rose to pour out the tea. 'He is only a child, and has not yet learned the wisdom of the world.'

'It is hardly fair to poison his mind, Ellen,' said Lady Ailsa,

in gentle rebuke. 'You might have given Edith a chance, at least, to win his unprejudiced love.'

'You don't understand,' said Ellen Macleod fiercely, for her passion rose, and her eye grew dark with the swelling tumult within. '*That* is where it stings. I have watched the boy with all a mother's pride, and loved him for his manliness and noble bearing. I thought he was giving fair promise of fitness for the position I thought would be surely his. And now I must crush every manly attribute, and make him fit to serve others; for, God help him! he has now no heritage. By the labour of his hands and the sweat of his brow, Fergus Macleod must earn his bread.'



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CHAPTER IV.

WELCOME HOME.

O child, thy life should be
Ev'n as thy open brow,
Careless and lovely.

HOWITT.



THE chill October rain beat upon the window panes, against which a small child face was pressed, peering out wistfully into the gathering night. It was little Sheila Murray, all alone in the drawing-room, watching for her mother's home-coming to Dalmore. She had been parted from her for three weeks, and though the time had been spent happily enough among her cousins at Murrayslaugh, and though gentle Aunt Ailsa had acted a mother's part towards her, what that parting had been to the child was only known to herself. She was a strange, quiet, clinging little mortal, thoughtful beyond her years, not given much to the boisterous play of other children, though she was a perfect child in all her ways. There was something touching and pathetic in her attitude and expression as she sat curled up on the window-seat, looking out on the dreary landscape, though she could not see the road for the blinding mist of rain. She wore a white dress; and Aunt Ailsa, out of compliment to the Laird of Dalmore, had bidden Anne, who was retained as nurse at Dalmore, tie a sash of the Macdonald

tartan about her waist. The child, quick to notice the new ribbon, had asked its meaning, and Anne had answered back that it was her new papa's colours, which she must always wear now.

'Her new papa's colours!' The child had pondered these words in her small mind for hours, without being able to understand their meaning.

Poor little Sheila! Dalmore, that magic word which had been so often on her lips of late, had grievously disappointed her when she alighted from the carriage at its entrance that dreary afternoon. It had chilled her young heart; and when she was dressed and sent into the big, gloomy drawing-room to await her mother and her 'new papa's' home-coming, a great sense of desolation had come upon her, and, curling herself up in the deerskin by the fire, she cried herself to sleep. When she awoke, the shadows were gathering in the long room, the wood fire was smouldering on the hearth, and Anne, gossiping with her new master's domestics, had forgotten all about her little charge. The house was very silent. Not a sound was to be heard but the sighing wind among the pines, and the monotonous plashing of the rain upon the panes. The carriage was very late, but, before it arrived, an uninvited guest came up the brae to the house, and, with all the freedom of familiarity, marched up to the drawing-room, muddy boots and all. At the opening of the door, Sheila slipped from her high perch on the window-seat, and came expectantly across the floor. But instead of her mother it was only a small boy who entered, attired in a damp kilt, and with the feathers in his bonnet dripping in his hand. He shut the door, and advanced into the room with a peculiar expression on his face. The two children stood on the hearth-rug, surveying each other with delightful deliberation for a few minutes. Then Sheila spoke, with a curious mixture of shyness and dignity—

'Who are you, little boy?'

'Fergus Macleod,' was the prompt reply. 'Who are you?'

'Sheila Murray. My mamma and me have come to live here now with Mr. Macdonald,' said Sheila proudly, and

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beginning to smooth the ribbon of her sash with her dainty little hand. 'Do you know Mr. Macdonald, little boy—my papa?'

'He is my Uncle Graham,' said Fergus, drawing himself up. 'My mother and I lived here before you came.'

'And where do you live now?'

'At Shonnen,' said the boy, with a break in his voice which made Sheila open her eyes very wide indeed.

'Don't cry, little boy,' she said, in a gentle, patronizing, reassuring tone, such as a mother might employ towards her child. 'Would you like better to live in this house?'

'Yes; Shonnen is a little house, and it is on the roadside,' said Fergus contemptuously. 'I can't live in it.'

'Well, I'm sure my mamma and my new papa will let you live here if you ask them. It is such a big house—rooms, and rooms, and rooms, nearly as many as Aunt Ailsa's. Then you and I could play cattie and doggie. Do you know cattie and doggie, little boy?'

'No; I never play. I'm a great deal too old for that. I am nine,' said the lad. 'Are you five yet?'

'O yes; next Sunday is my birthday, and I am six. See, my sash is the same colour as your kilt. Don't touch it, little boy; your hands are all wet.'

'I'm not touching it, and my hands are quite dry,' said Fergus quickly. 'Don't call me a boy. I can ride Uncle Graham's Mora—a big, wild horse—and I have had a pony since I was six. Did you ever see a pony?'

'Yes; I ride on Alastair Murray's pony when I am at Aunt Ailsa's. Do you know Aunt Ailsa, Fergus? I love her next to mamma.'

'No, I don't know your Aunt Ailsa,' said Fergus quickly.

In looking round the familiar room it had suddenly come upon the boy that he had no right in Dalmore. Young though he was, he had learned to love the place with a love which was to sadden youth and early manhood with a dark cloud. Very early had the cross fallen on the shoulders of Fergus Macleod.

'You are a rude little boy, Fergus Macleod,' said Sheila, in her quiet, quaint way. 'Aunt Ailsa makes her boys so

polite to ladies. But then you have no Aunt Ailsa. Have you come over to see mamma and me to-day?'

'No; I came because there is no garden or stable, or—or anything, at Shonnen,' said the boy, with a strange, weary look. 'Will your mamma be angry if she sees me here?'

'My mamma is never angry. She will let you live here, I am quite sure,' said Sheila promptly. 'And I'll ask my new papa. He said he would buy me a pony, and you can ride on it, Fergus, when I am not on it.'

'My mother said you would never let us into Dalmore again, and so I came up to see,' said Fergus.

'Just sit down, and wait till my mamma comes,' said Sheila reassuringly; and, taking the boy's bonnet from his hand, she led him over to the fire. It was delightful to see her; the exquisite blending of sympathy and protection and childlike tenderness in her whole demeanour, was unlike a child. So these two, whose way of life was to lead them together into many strange paths, met, and drew to each other, without any provision of that eventful future in store.

Presently the servant came in to replenish the fire, and, after one look at the children, sitting contentedly side by side, went out with a tear in her eye.

'I wish Laddy Macleod saw the picture in the drawing-room,' she said to her mates. 'It wad serve her for meat an' drink for a week, an' more. I dout she'll no divide Shonnen an' Dalmore.'

Almost as she made her speech, the carriage with the Laird and his wife swept up to the door, and in a few moments Edith Murray crossed the threshold of her new home, leaning on her husband's arm. Sheila was not in the hall, but through the open doors, and down the staircase, there came floating the merry music of children's voices, and the clatter of hurrying feet.

'Did any of her cousins come up with Miss Sheila, Anne?' she asked, with a smile, turning to the familiar face of her own maid.

'No, ma'am,' said Anne, smiling too; for she was delighted to see her mistress looking so well and happy.

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Then the Laird and his wife went upstairs together, and, the drawing-room door being open, they had a full view of the firelit interior, where a little elf in white was running laughing round the room, pursued by Fergus, laughing all his might too. Cattie and doggie had begun!

'Who is that, Graham?' she whispered.

'Ellen's boy, my dear. The bairns will make peace in Dalmore,' he said significantly. 'Hulloa! is not this a pretty din to kick up in a drawing-room, eh?'

The children came to a dead stop; then Sheila, with a shriek of delight, sprang into her mother's arms; but, in spite of his uncle's reassuring smile, the boy hung back, remembering his mother's words. Ay, Ellen Macleod had poisoned the young heart against Dalmore, and could she have seen the picture in the drawing-room that night, her ire would have been great indeed.

'This is Fergus, mamma; such a nice little boy,' said Sheila, presently slipping from her mother's arms. 'He is afraid of you, mamma—just think!'

'Fergus will not be afraid of me, darling, after to-night,' said Edith Macdonald; and at sound of the sweet voice the boy's eyes were raised almost wonderingly to the face of the speaker. She put her two soft, kind hands on his shoulders, and, bending down, kissed him straight on the brow above his earnest eyes.

'I am Aunt Edith, dear. Do you think you will love me a little? I intend to love you a great deal.'

'Oh, Uncle Graham!' cried the lad, breaking from her, and holding fast by his uncle's hand, for there was a perfect confidence between them; 'mother said they would hate me, and put me out of Dalmore.'

'And you have come to see for yourself, Fergus?' said his uncle. 'That was right. Learn early to form and act on your own opinion. It will make you independent. Well, Edith, in spite of the dreary look of the place outside, this looks comfortable enough, eh?' he asked, turning to his wife.

'Yes; this is a lovely old room, Graham, and the children

make it home-like. If only the boy's mother had stayed to welcome me,' she said in a low voice.

'She'll never do that, so there's no use making yourself miserable about it,' said Macdonald, and his mouth took a stern curve. 'Well, Fergus, what's been happening in Amulree and the Fauld while I have been away?'

'Nothing much, Uncle Graham. I fought Angus M'Bean in the school on Tuesday, and the master thrashed me.'

'What school?'

'Peter Crerar's. I go there now.'

Macdonald bit his lip, and his wife saw his eyes flash.

'Upon my word, Ellen's folly transcends everything!' he muttered. 'But why in the world can't you go on as usual with your lessons at the manse?'

The boy's face flushed, and he did not speak.

'Did your mother give you any reason, Fergus?' asked his uncle quickly, noticing his hesitation.

'She said that as I would need to make my own living, the sooner I made friends among poor boys the better,' said the boy, in a slow and pained voice, for he felt it acutely. He was old beyond his years. The constant companionship of grown-up people had given his childish thoughts the maturity of manhood. Though he was compelled to obey his mother, he had felt her injustice and foolish resentment. It was scarcely a child's action to come to Dalmore to see for himself how matters stood.

'Angus M'Bean is the factor's son, Edith,' said Macdonald, looking towards his wife. 'Pray, what were ye fighting about?'

'He laughed at my mother, Uncle Graham, and asked how we liked Shonnen,' said Fergus, with heaving bosom, 'and I just knocked him down straight on the floor in the school. The master thrashed me, and when we got out I fought Angus on the road.'

'You bloodthirsty young rascal!' laughed Macdonald; but his wife saw that he was pleased with the spirit of the boy. 'And who beat?'

'It was a drawn battle,' said Fergus proudly. 'But I'll fight him when I'm bigger. He's a far bigger boy than me,

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and stronger, too. But he's a coward, Uncle Graham. He hits little boys and girls.'

It would be impossible to set down the emphasis which Fergus laid on the last word.

'Then he's a horrid boy, and I hate him!' cried Sheila shrilly. 'I like you, Fergus, and you can ride on my pony if you like.'

'But he has his own pony. Donald is in the stable, isn't he, Fergus?'

'Yes, Uncle Graham; but mother says I'm not to go on him, nor come to Dalmore any more,' cried Fergus, in a great burst of sorrow; and, ashamed of his tears, he turned round and ran out of the room.

None attempted to detain him. They saw that the childish heart was full, and that it would have its vent. Edith Macdonald turned away to her dressing-room with a shadow in her eyes and on her heart.

'What a woman, Graham!' she said, when she was able to speak. 'Although she is his mother, she is not fit to have the care of that fine, sensitive-souled boy. She'll break his heart.'

'I'm not done with Ellen yet,' said Macdonald grimly. 'She has forgotten that her husband left me guardian of the boy, and she can't do what she pleases with his education and upbringing. Peter Crerar's school, indeed! The woman's a perfect fool.'

'It must have been a great blow to her, when she acted so,' said Edith, with a sigh. 'I wonder if we have acted right, Graham?'

'Now, Edith, after all my warnings, you are just going to fret about this. What you have to do is to make yourself happy and at home in Dalmore. It is yours now. I'll deal with Ellen. As for the boy, if he turns out as he promises, he'll not be a sufferer. I like him, and I'll do my duty by him. But Ellen must be brought to her senses first, or she'll ruin him.'

Meanwhile, Fergus, with wet eyes, and sore, sore heart, was running all his might down the avenue, away from Dalmore.

When he reached the bridge spanning the Girron Burn, he

stood on it a little while with the rain beating down upon him, watching the foaming torrent, whose current carried all before it. Three days' rain had brought the burn down in flood. There was something soothing to the boy in the swift rush of that wild tide, and before he had watched it for many minutes he began to wonder how many days it would be before he could fish the burn. There was a long yellow line in the far west, and the lowering clouds were beginning to lighten, and the wet caps of mist to roll from the mountain tops. The storm was nearly over, and by Saturday, he calculated, the burn might be in order. Having arrived at this conclusion, he walked soberly over to the road, and, passing by the school and the inn, turned off to his new home.

It was a bare, barren-looking house, not much bigger than a cottage, though it was called Shonnen Lodge. It stood by the roadside, and had no garden, but only a few stunted birch trees at either side, and the gaunt, bare slope of Craig Hulich rising abruptly behind it. It was a bitter change indeed from Dalmore, and there is no doubt that both mother and son felt it keenly. Ellen Macleod had missed the boy from the house, and, watching by the upper front windows, she saw him cross the Girron Burn, and guessed where he had been.

She opened the door to him herself, and bade him come in, in a sharp, angry voice.

'You've been at Dalmore, Fergus?'

'Yes, mother,' he answered, in a low voice.

'And are you satisfied now?' she asked snappishly. 'I saw them ride by in their fine carriage. You got a sorry welcome, I expect, that you have come back so soon?'

'Mother, I don't think they are what you said,' he ventured to say, in a low voice. 'Aunt Edith is very kind.'

'Aunt Edith, indeed! Have you got that length already?' she asked sourly. 'Do you know you deliberately disobeyed me this afternoon, Fergus?'

'I am sorry, mother. I forgot.'

'That is no excuse. If you forget what I say again, Fergus, I must punish you very severely. I will not do it to-day, as I suppose you were curious to see them,' she said contemptu-

ously. 'Hear me again. You are *not* to go to Dalmore. You have no right in it. That woman and her child have taken from you. She is *not* your aunt. I forbid you to call her aunt.'

The boy never spoke, but crouched down by the fire like a dog who has been beaten for a fault he cannot understand. He thought of the place he had left not long ago—of the happy, laughing child; of the sweet-faced, kind-voiced mother; and of his uncle, whom, with all his sternness, he dearly loved. No doubt the tie which binds mother and child is strong, but can it not be weakened—nay, almost severed—by coldness and neglect? Ellen Macleod had done very little to win the boy's love, and he had a deep, sensitive, yearning heart. She did not know what a harvest of anguish she was heaping up for herself—ay, and for him; for there came a day when the conflict betwixt choice and duty became a matter of awful moment for Fergus Macleod.





CHAPTER V.

THE KIRK OF AMULREE.

But on that gentle heart a shadow fell
And darkly lay, stealing the sunlight sweet
From out her life.

THE next day was the Sabbath. It dawned fair and bright for October, with a clear, soft sky overhead, and a sprinkling of hoar-frost scattered like manna on the ground. The roads even were made crisp and firm by the first frost of the season, and walking was very pleasant. The Laird's folk went on foot to the church in Amulree,—Macdonald and his fair wife before, and Anne, with Sheila, coming up behind. There was a goodly gathering in the kirk, for the fine season had tempted the shooting tenants to linger longer than usual, and all the country folk turned out in expectation of seeing the new lady of Dalmore.

They could not think enough of it when they saw her come walking up the road so humbly and unostentatiously, like themselves, without a bit of display or grandeur to make her conspicuous. The kirk stood on a piece of rising ground overlooking the river, as it ran swiftly and silently from its source in the loch. It was a fine situation, and the church itself was a picturesque white-washed building, of long, narrow construction, and having a curious little belfry, containing a tinkling,

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old-fashioned bell. The grassy enclosure surrounding the church was used as a burying-ground, as was evidenced by the uneven mounds scattered here and there, though there were but few headstones to be seen.

The Laird's pew was on the left hand of the pulpit, and after entering, Mrs. Macdonald knelt for a moment in silent prayer—an action so unusual in the kirk of Amulree, that one looked to the other, and there were even more than one solemn head-shaking. It was rather like a Papist, they thought, but hoped the Laird had not been drawn into an unholy marriage.

In these few brief seconds Edith Macdonald had time to breathe a passionate prayer for a blessing on her new life and home. The Laird looked proud and happy enough, however. There was no doubt as to his opinion about the step he had taken; and as for Sheila, she sat very bolt upright, with her big brown eyes wandering over the whole interior of the kirk. It was the very funniest church she had ever been in in all her life.

The Laird's seat was cushioned, and the boards were laid pretty evenly on the floor, but along the passages—and, indeed, in all the other pews—there was no attempt at systematic flooring; and in many places, notably under the long communion table, which ran from end to end of the church, the sandy soil was quite uncovered. It was a cold, uninviting place altogether, very different from the little Episcopalian chapel in Dunkeld, which Edith had regularly attended.

Then the pulpit and the precentor's box below were curious narrow contrivances, very deep and narrow, in which the preacher's eloquence was kept within due limits. But the kirk of Amulree had always been noted for the solidity of its pulpit ministrations, and had no connection with such frivolities as loud shouting of the Word, and senseless throwing about of the arms to enforce its doctrine. A fine drowsy atmosphere usually pervaded the kirk during the three-quarters of an hour the sermon lasted.

Just as the bell began to ring, the Laird opened the door of the pew, and in walked Colin, quite doucelly, and curled himself up on the floor. He had been over at Shonnen, and

had come to church, as usual, at Fergus Macleod's heels. After Colin lay down, the Laird kept his eye on the door, wondering how Ellen would conduct herself, and whether she would have the presumption to come down and sit in the pew beside the woman against whom she cherished such causeless anger.

She came in at length, with her thick crape veil hanging down over her face, and took a seat in a pew near the door, out of sight of the folk from Dalmore. Sheila's small stature prevented her seeing where Fergus went, but she was sorry he did not come to sit by her. Her attention, however, was presently diverted by the entrance of an individual in a sweeping black cloak, who came down the aisle with an air of dignity very impressive to behold. It was not the minister, however, but Ewan M'Fadyen, the precentor, quite as important and necessary an official as the minister—perhaps, in his own estimation, more so.

He stepped into his box, closed the door, and blew his nose with an astounding report, Sheila watching him with the most open-eyed wonder all the while. Her mother could not but smile, indeed, at the expression on her face. The Laird smiled too, when Ewan, without the least shame or attempt to hide his object, stood up and turned towards the Dalmore pew. Now Ewan had a peculiar cast in his eye, which gave his face a somewhat evil expression, and when he was looking intently at anything, he screwed his 'skelly' eye up until it contorted the side of his face and made his visage a sight to see. In this singular but characteristic manner Ewan stared at the Laird's wife for a full second or so, and then, slowly nodding his head, sat down and took a pinch of snuff, indicative of his absolute approval. Edith hastily drew down her veil, not only to hide her rising colour, but the smile which was like to become a laugh. Then the minister gave out the psalm, and Ewan stood up to raise the tune, which was 'Martyrdom.' Ewan M'Fadyen's mode of conducting the psalmody was unique in the extreme, and alas! too often provocative of mirth among the ungodly strangers who were occasional visitors to the kirk of Amulree. He held the book directly out from his nose, and had his five fingers carefully spread out upon the boards.

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After having read aloud the first two lines in a half singing voice, he cleared his throat, and attempted to raise the first note. But it would not come, as a usual thing, until the fourth or fifth clearing of the throat, each time more loudly than before, and with his one eye closed up all the time. The magic seemed to lie in his fingers, for when they began to move on the boards Ewan moved also, and the tune was raised.

His utter unconsciousness of any oddity or singularity in his preliminaries was most delightful to behold; but it was a fearful trial to the decorum of those unaccustomed to the scene. The Laird's wife shook with silent laughter, and even Macdonald thought Ewan excelled himself. Sheila amused him, perhaps, more than Ewan. She stood on tiptoe on the seat, with her small neck craned, in order that she might have a full view of the precentor's box. There was no smile on her face, or any sign of amusement—only a look of perfect, solemn wonder, which was irresistible. I fear that, on the whole, the spirit of solemnity befitting the solemn exercises of the day was rather wanting in the Laird's pew that morning. Edith, however, enjoyed the sermon, and had time to compose her thoughts. She wished, indeed, that the service had closed with the sermon, for Ewan's extraordinary gestures and grimaces once more banished every serious thought from her mind. They did not hasten out of the church, and when they rose at length all the benches were empty except the seat where Ellen Macleod sat, with her grave-faced boy by her side. Edith saw her, and, without a moment's hesitation, stepped round before the precentor's box, and stood directly before her.

'Ellen,' she said, and her sweet voice shook as she extended her hand, 'we are in the house of God. Will you not touch my hand in token of friendship and forgiveness if I have unwittingly done wrong?'

It was an appeal few could have resisted. The eyes of Fergus were raised to his mother's face with an imploring look, but without any effect on the stony heart of Ellen Macleod. She rose from her seat, and, without raising her veil, swept her brother's wife a little haughty curtsey, and passed out of the church.

Edith hastily drew down her own veil, not wishing her husband to see her tears. But he saw the whole scene, and when she joined him there was a dark cloud on his brow.

'You ought not to have humiliated yourself to her, Edith,' he said, more hastily than he had ever spoken to her before. But at that moment their attention was directed by Ewan M'Fadyen standing on the doorstep in his robe of office, with a bland smile on his face.

'I wish you good-morning, Laird, and a full measure of prosperous felicity to yourself and your noble lady,' said Ewan, trotting out his best English and most 'lang-nebbit' words to grace the occasion; 'and I make bold to prophesy and prognosticate that never, in all the pellucid annals of the ancient house of Macdonald, has a fairer, more noble lady reigned paramount in Dalmore.'

It was a happy interruption, and the Laird burst into a laugh.

'Oh, Ewan, man, spare your lang-nebbit words. Stick to plain speaking or Gaelic, if you want to be impressive,' he said. 'Mrs. Macdonald, let me present Ewan M'Fadyen, our worthy precentor. He is a tenant in Achnaufauld. You'll likely know him better by and by.'

'I hope so,' said Edith; and, with a pleasant smile, she extended her hand to honest Ewan.

'May every auspicious blessing descend on your honourable head, madam!' he said, bending his shaggy head over it. 'As I said before, I prognosticate again that you will be the author and originator of many blessed days for Dalmore.'

Macdonald, laughing still, took his wife on his arm and hurried her out to the carriage, which he had ordered to be in waiting to convey them up the steep ascent to Dalmore. The country folks were lingering about the churchyard and the manse road, eager for a better look at the Laird's wife. They were mostly his tenants, though Edith did not know it, but she had a smile for all. Just as Macdonald handed his wife into the carriage, a horseman rode up, and, taking off his hat, drew rein, evidently wishing to be presented.

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whispered Macdonald. 'You must excuse us, M'Bean. Come up to the house and pay your respects to Mrs. Macdonald. The kirk door is hardly the place to hold a levee.'

Somewhat chagrined, Mr. M'Bean raised his hat again, and rode off. He had hoped for a better reception before all the cottars, and Mrs. Macdonald's acknowledgment of him had been a little distant. She was not, indeed, very favourably impressed by his hard, keen visage and rather forward manners. Angus M'Bean did not like to be called a land-steward. He always called and wrote himself factor to Macdonald of Dalmore.

'The manners and customs up here are rather primitive, Graham,' said Mrs. Macdonald, as the carriage rolled along the smooth road to the Girron Brig.

'Ay; perhaps I ought to have prepared you for Dugald's eccentricities. We are accustomed to them, and they do not strike us. He is quite a character. Did you notice his noble manner of expressing himself?'

'It is about as absurd as his singing,' laughed Edith.

'Ay; if he can get a long word hauled in, in it goes, whether it has any fitness or not. I suppose it must have some significance to himself. They get some terrible laughs at him, along at Donald Macalpine, the smith's. Well, Sheila, you are very quiet.'

'Oh, mamma, such a funny, funny church!' said Sheila, able to laugh now at what had held her spell-bound at first.

'Did you ever see a church where dogs go to? Papa, may I take Tory next Sunday?'

'I doubt Tory would not keep so quiet as Colin. He has not been trained to church-going,' said Macdonald. 'The shepherds' dogs always accompany their masters to church in the Highlands.'

'Fergus never came to speak to us, papa. Does he live far away from here?'

'At the other side of the church. I daresay you will see him to-morrow. He is always about on the hills,' said Macdonald; and began to name some of the hills to Edith, for he saw her eyes cloud. Ay, Ellen Macleod had cast a shadow on Dalmore which would be ever present with its gentle mistress, 'obbing

her married life of half its sweetness. Macdonald, who was not in the least put about by his sister's foolish conduct, except to feel a trifle annoyed when any new phase of it struck him, could not understand how it weighed upon his wife's heart, nor how she brooded upon it in silence and solitude, and prayed that the only cloud on her happiness might be swept away. It might have given Ellen Macleod a grim satisfaction had she known that her uncompromising enmity was to her brother's wife a veritable skeleton in the cupboard.

'Now, Edith,' said Macdonald, following her up to her dressing-room when they entered the house, 'I could not hear what you said to Ellen, but I know it was an appeal of some sort. It is to be the last. She shall beg *your* pardon before she sets foot in Dalmore again. I mean what I say.'

He put his hands with a kind of rough kindness on her shoulders, and turned her face to him, in order to enforce his words. She tried to smile at him, as she answered tremulously,—

'I wanted to give her a chance, Graham. I am so happy, I cannot bear that there should be any cloud. Do you think she will relent?'

'Do you see Craig Hulich over there, Edith? Do you think it could walk over here and place itself in the Girron Burn? Ellen Macleod will never forgive you, so the sooner you forget that she is in existence the better.'

'I am sorry for the boy. We must try and make it up to him, Graham.'

'If she will let me. But she'll watch him, poor laddie! like a hawk. But I'll keep my eye on Fergus for his father's sake, and for his own. He's as fine a lad as ever wore the kilt, and none of his mother's ill-temper about him, if she does not spoil him in the making.'

It seemed a fearful thing to Edith Macdonald that a woman should cherish a mortal enmity in her heart, and pride herself that she never forgave an injury. She could neither understand nor comprehend Ellen Macleod's fierce, dark creed; but she pitied her from the bottom of her heart, and would have served her if she had any opportunity. But Ellen Macleod went home

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to the plain house of Shonnen filled with hate and anger against her brother's wife, who looked so fair and sweet and young by his side that day in the kirk of Amulree, sitting in the seat she had usurped. And Fergus, weighed down by a feeling of desolation and misery he could not understand, walked with downcast head by her side, and never a word passed between them. The boy suffered as she had no idea of. He had a feeling heart and a sensitive soul. Perhaps he was too young to comprehend the difference his uncle's marriage might make for him; but I would rather believe that there was that in him which could rise above such selfish and sordid considerations. I do not think that Fergus M'Leod, though he is not perfect, will disappoint us in the end.

'Did you see the vain thing, like a peacock, with the nodding feathers in her bonnet?—not a fit head-dress for the kirk,' said his mother, finding her tongue at length, when they came in sight of Shonnen. 'A vain, empty peacock! and she has made a bonnie fool of your Uncle Graham.'

'How, mother?'

'I saw the folk laugh at the old grey-headed man handing her with such pride into the coach. Silly, silly fools! She'll lead him a fine dance yet, or I'm mistaken. What did you think of her, Fergus?' she asked, suddenly bending her dark eyes keenly on the boy at her side.

'I thought, mother, she looked like an angel,' said the boy simply, and without hesitation; for such, indeed, had been his thought as he saw the pale, fair, sweet countenance shining under the nodding feathers of the bridal bonnet.

'Oh, of course you'll stick up for her!' said his mother sourly. 'Boy, do you think there is no duty from a son to his mother? I think I'll need to get you to read the commandments and the Catechism this very day.'

The boy's lips quivered; and when they passed through the gate of Shonnen, instead of following his mother into the house, he turned round the end, and, climbing up the rising ground, threw himself down on a heathery hillock among the scanty birches.

Colin followed, and, sitting down beside him, lifted one sober

paw and let it fall on his master's back. His tail was wagging sympathetically all the while, and suddenly Fergus flung his arms around his neck, and buried his face in his shaggy hair.

'Oh, Colin, lad!' he cried, and all the sore grief he found so little to thole was expressed in that weary cry, 'there's only you to me!'



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CHAPTER VI.

THE NETHER MILLSTONE.

Dark is the soul whose sullen creed can bind
In chains like these.

O. W. HOLMES.

MACDONALD rode down to Shonnen Lodge next morning before breakfast. He knew his sister was an early riser, and he was anxious to have this matter settled as soon as possible. He was very angry that she should have dared to send the boy to the Fauld school, and knew it was only done in a moment of passion to vex him. For Ellen was proud enough; and, though it had pleased her to make a great talk about the poverty and obscurity to which her brother's marriage had consigned her, she would not have allowed any one else to hint at such a thing. To any outsider, not intimately connected with the family, she professed herself quite well pleased with the new arrangement at Dalmore.

Fergus, an early riser too, was out on the hill, and, seeing his uncle come, flew down to meet him.

'Yes, you can take Mora, and ride her gently along the road, Fergus, while I talk to your mother. Up you go!'

With a little assistance from his uncle, Fergus sprang delightedly to the saddle, and cantered off down the road towards Loch Fraochie. His uncle stood a moment to admire

the boy's splendid bearing in the saddle, and to note how well he kept the fiery mare in curb. Fergus Macleod feared no living thing in the world except his mother.

The door was open, and Macdonald walked unceremoniously into the house. He found his sister in the little dining-room, sitting over the fire doing nothing. She merely looked up at her brother's entrance, but did not signify in any way that she was aware of his presence.

'Well, Ellen, how are you? Fine morning after the rain,' he said heartily.

'Is it?' she asked briefly; for she resented the happy, hearty ring in his voice, the brightness in his eye; all signs of the happiness she so sorely grudged him. She considered them insulting to herself in her poor estate.

'Fergus came up to welcome his aunt on Saturday night, though you didn't. Still in the tantrums, eh?'

Ellen Macleod made no reply.

'I didn't think you'd keep up an ill-will so long, Ellen,' he said gravely. 'Will you *not* come up and see my wife?'

'I passed my word, Macdonald. All I ask from you and yours now is to be left alone.'

'You are likely to be. You are not such pleasant company, ma'am,' returned Macdonald candidly. 'It's the boy I'm come about. So you've swallowed your pride, and sent him to school with the cottars' sons? What's to be the meaning or end of this, I'd like to know?'

'I can do what I like with my own, I suppose?' said Ellen Macleod slowly; 'and as Fergus will have to earn his bread by the labour of his hands, he had better accustom himself early to the society in which he is likely to move in future.'

'Ah, well! it won't do the lad any harm for a year or so,' said Macdonald; and his off hand way was extremely galling to his sister. 'I'll step in when I think there's need. You're making a pretty fool of yourself, Ellen, before the country-side, I can tell you.'

'Much do I care for the talk of the cuntry-side!' she exclaimed passionately. 'Go back to your pink-faced wife,

Macdonald, and leave me and mine in peace. You look gay and happy enough. You can do without us.'

'Oh, very well; as I said before, it was the boy I came to see after. You won't be able to keep him out of Dalmore, Ellen.'

'I have laid my commands on him again. If he disobeys them he is to be severely punished.'

'Then the boy is to suffer too?' said Macdonald more gloomily. 'Be careful how you treat him, Ellen. It will not be easy for him to keep away from the old place. Let him come and go as he likes.'

'No, I shall not. If I am cruel it is to be kind. He would only set his heart more and more on the place, and the awakening would be ten times more bitter. You are very wise in your own conceit, Macdonald, but you can't teach a mother how to treat her own son.'

'Well, well, perhaps not. I suppose I may speak to him in passing, may I?' asked Macdonald, with a slight smile, as he turned to go.

She vouchsafed him no reply, and so the unsatisfactory interview came to an end.

Macdonald was not in the least depressed by it, except for the boy's sake. He felt tempted to press him to come to Dalmore as often as he pleased, but it would not be right, he knew, to set so young a child in direct defiance of his mother's will, though that will were harsh and unjust.

'Oh, Uncle Graham! it is just splendid to ride Mora,' cried Fergus, when he drew rein, breathlessly, in the middle of the road before his uncle. 'When I'm a man I'll buy a horse just like Mora.'

'In the meantime, my boy, what is to become of your own Donald? He'll eat his head off in the stable if you don't come up to Dalmore.'

Fergus threw himself from the saddle, and his uncle saw that his eyes were wet.

'We must manage somehow, Fergus,' said Macdonald cheerily. 'When you want Donald, send one of the village boys up, and he'll bring him down to the Girron Brig for you.'

And don't vex yourself. This cloud'll maybe blow over sooner than you think.'

'Oh, Uncle Graham!' The boy's face positively glowed through his tears, and he laid his cheek against his uncle's brown hand as it hung down by Mora's side.

'Do your best at Peter Crerar's, Fergus, and keep Angus M'Bean in order,' said Macdonald, with a twinkle in his eye. 'And never forget that your uncle's in Dalmore—ay, and your aunt, too, Fergus. She wouldn't hurt a hair of your head.'

'Oh, I know. Good-bye.'

Graham Macdonald did not readily part with money, but if ever the generous impulses of his heart had been called into play, the last few weeks had done it. Edith Murray had wrought a change, indeed, in grim Macdonald of Dalmore.

So, when Mora cantered off, Fergus found himself with a golden sovereign in his palm, and what was much better, a glow of pleasure at his heart. Macdonald was a king in his nephew's eyes; for, whatever the man's faults, and they were many, he had been a kind, affectionate guardian to his sister's son. Macdonald restrained his impatient Mora, and rode slowly along the river-side, keeping his eye on the fields as he went.

A backward summer had made a late harvest in Strathbraan and Glenquaich, and the cottars in Achnafauld, whose crofts stood on the damp, cold soil at the top of Loch Fraochie, were like to have a poor return for their labour. There were several fields, indeed, lying partially submerged, and the standing stooks had a blackened, stunted appearance, which augured ill for the quality of the grain. Macdonald himself did not interfere with his tenants, all his dealings with them being carried on through the medium of Angus M'Bean, the factor, who lived in Auchloy, a snug domicile on the Garrows side of the loch. If there was a man in the strath hated and feared, it was Angus M'Bean, but by dint of his smooth tongue and economical management of the estate he had made his position secure. He was indispensable to the Laird. Macdonald had really not the remotest idea of the way the tenants

were ground to the earth, and because he exacted the rent to the uttermost farthing, did not know at what cost and sacrifice it was paid. And Angus M'Bean took very good care that there were very few direct comings and goings betwixt the Laird and the tenants. Macdonald was struck by the pitiable appearance of the crofts, and determined to ask Angus M'Bean whether the poorer cottars were not likely to sustain any loss. It was the Laird's boast that his factor was a thoroughly practical man, for he had not only been in his early days a cottar himself, but had for many years now been farmer in Auchloy, the largest holding attached to Dalmore. His experience, therefore, fitted him in a peculiar way to understand the workings of the estate and the needs of the tenantry. The man might know his business well enough, but he was a tyrant and a coward, and his disposition was selfish and avaricious in the extreme. Mr. M'Bean did not approve of little crofts, nor of a large number of tenants on an estate. They gave too much trouble and too meagre returns, and it was his hope and ambition to see Achnafauld swept clean away from Glenquaich, and Dalmore and Findowie let out in large farms. But his progress was very slow. As long as the rents were paid, the Laird approved the cottars remaining on their crofts. The same families had inhabited the little thatched cottages for hundreds of years—in days, indeed, before the name of Macdonald was known in Glenquaich.

The Laird was very seldom in the clachan, and when, on his return from visiting his sister, he rode Mora through the burn which wimpled past the doors, the wifes all ran out to give him a curtsey as he passed. They had a new interest in him now since he had become a married man, though they had thought him very stingy not to give something for them to make merry with at his bridal. The idea had never occurred to Macdonald himself, and nobody had suggested it to him. He drew rein and sprang from the saddle at the smith's door, one of the mare's shoes being loose. Donald Macalpine, the smith, was in at his breakfast, but in an instant he was out to wait upon the Laird, while Mary, his wife, looked at him over the white muslin screen at the window.

'Good-day, smith. Look to the mare's hind foot, will you? A stone in the burn tripped her up, and some of the nails are out. Fine morning after the rain.'

'Ay, sir, sure it is,' said Donald.

'I hope the Laird is weel, and his Leddy, too?'

'Very well, thank you. Poor weather for the harvest. The crofts seem in a sorry condition, Donald.'

'Ay,' said Donald, shaking his head as he scraped the mare's shoe with his knife. 'The Lord has a queer way o' workin'. It seems to me a needless wastry, an' a sinfu', though He can dae nae sin, to destroy the fruits of the earth after they are come to the ear.'

'The sun may shine yet, Donald,' said the Laird cheerily. 'There seems to be bulk enough.'

'Ay, but it's as green as leeks,' was Donald's brief comment.

'Wo, beestie! stand still.'

Mora was growing impatient of the strange touch on her dainty limb, and it required all the smith's strong energy to keep her quiet.

'Anything new in the Fauld, Donald?' asked the Laird.

'Naething, but that Jenny Menzies has gotten Jock's twa bairns hame from Glesca, an' a bonnie ootery she's makin' about them.'

'What has become of Jock?'

'Deid; an' his wife an' a'. They're nice bits o' bairns. The lassie's a wee doo; the laddie has a wan'ert look. Malcolm and Katie, they are ca'd.'

'Two more scholars for Peter Crerar,' laughed the Laird. 'Ye hae gotten my nephew to school in the Fauld.'

'Ay, sure, an' Peter Crerar himsel' is neither to haud nor bind ower it,' said the smith. 'Weel, he'll get a guid education frae Peter. He has a heid.'

'Well, well, it will do the lad no harm, Donald. Is she all right now?' said the Laird, springing to his saddle. 'Thanks to you; give my respects to Mary.'

Donald, with his hands under his leather apron, watched the Laird ride round by Rob Macnaughton's corner, then slowly sauntered into the house, which was pervaded by a

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fine smell of toasted oatcakes, Mary being busy with her baking.

'That was the Laird?' Mary said, her sonsy face full of interest.

'Ay, it was. I never saw the Laird mair frank an' free. Mary Maca pine,' Donald answered; 'I canna think him as had a man as Angus M'Bean of Auchloy would make cut. There's a kindness in his eye like a sun-blink on the loch. I'd a mind to ask him was it his wull that the loch fi-hin' was ta'en awa' frae us. But I'll do it another day, Mary Maca pine, as sure as I stand here.'

'Donald, ye'll not meddle wi' it, my man, or we'll have Angus M'Bean down on us, an' he's an ill enemy. Eh! Katie Menzies, my lamb, is that you?' she cried, with a motherly smile at a bonnie wee girlie, with yellow hair and eyes like the forget-me-not, who looked shyly in at the door.

'Is Malky here?' she asked, with a strong west country accent. 'The skule's gaun in, an' auntie's awfu' angry. Malky's no' ready to gang. He got pawnies yesterday, an' he'll get them the day, for the maister's an' awfu' crabbit man.'

'Ay, Malky disna like the maister. Rin ye to the skule, Katie. Gie her a farl, Mary, an' let her awa',' said the smith kindly. 'I'll look for Malky. He'll be seekin' his lesson by the loch-side or on 'he hill.'

'He's gaen gyte wi' Rob Macnaughton's sangs,' said Marv, as she gave Katie a crisp oatcake and a pat on the cheek.

The smith laughed, and, lighting his pipe, stood in the porch a minute watching the bairns gathering in for the school. His heart warmed to them, and his eyes were filled with a fine light of soft tenderness. Mary and he had had but one child, who now slept in the burying-ground at Shian.

He did not need to go far to seek Malcolm, the truant. He saw him away up the hill near Auchloy, a solitary, lonely figure among the browsing sheep. The bairn was a strange bairn, not like others. He loved nothing better than to wander by himself among the hills or by the burns, which were a great

and wonderful revelation to the boy, whose eyes till now had seen nothing but paved streets and big stone houses, which seemed to touch the very sky.

He was a thorn in the flesh to hard, grasping Janet Menzies, his aunt, who looked upon the bairns as a heavy burden, and specially prophesied that the boy would never come to any good.



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CHAPTER VII.

BAIRN DAYS.

O little hearts ! that throb and beat
With such impatient, feverish heat—
Such limitless and strong desires.

LONGFELLOW.



HERE was no School Board in Achnafauld, and the cottars conducted their own municipal and educational matters to please themselves. There was only schooling six months in the year, from November till May, the children being required on the land in the summer. The teacher, Peter Crerar, the son of a small farmer on the opposite side of the river, was a clever young man, quite competent for his duties, and many a good scholar was turned out of that primitive schoolroom by the edge of the Achnafauld burn. For his six months' work, Peter Crerar received the sum of £6; but his food was found, as he obtained his meals in rotation at the house of each pupil's parents. His own home was so near at hand, he had his lodging there, though, had he been from a distance, bed would have been found as well as board. It was a primitive arrangement, but all parties were satisfied, and the foundation of a good, solid education was laid in these young minds at a very nominal cost.

Such was the academy to which, in a fit of spleen, Mrs.

Ellen Macleod had elected to send her son. There was a school in Amulree of a more ambitious type, but she had chosen Achnafauld because it was on Dalmore lands, and also because the factor's son, young Angus M'Bean, went to it. Not that the two boys had ever been friendly, the difference in their dispositions forbade it; but, of course, Ellen Macleod knew nothing of this. She had a great respect for Dalmore's factor, and though she was a shrewd woman in most things, she could not see through Angus M'Bean. He was a hypocrite and a time-server, a man who would spare no effort to advance his own selfish and avaricious ends. He had held the factorship for five years, and had commended himself to the Laird by his assiduous attention to his interests. Never had there been less trouble on Dalmore and Findowie; never had the rents been so punctually paid. Nevertheless, Angus M'Bean was slowly undermining the relations betwixt the cottars and the Laird, and discontent was smouldering hotly in Achnafauld.

Fergus Macleod had enjoyed his study under Mr. Macfarlane at the manse of Amulree, and he thought it a strange and new thing that his mother should send him to Peter Crerar's school. As the smith stood in the doorway that morning, he saw the tall, handsome lad, in his dark Macdonald kilt, coming up the burn-side, and he shook his head.

'It's hard on the laddie, ay is it; the Fauld schoolin's no' for him,' said Donald to himself; for the expression on the boy's face struck him. His head was down, and though he was walking quickly, there was a lack of energy and buoyancy about his whole demeanour. The smith, by reason of his fine instincts, was quick to note the significance of expression and attitude in both old and young. He saw at once that young Fergus Macleod was under a shadow, and his heart was full of sympathy for him. Under pretence of going to look for Malcolm, he sauntered through the clachan, and met Fergus at the stepping stones.

'A fine mornin', sir,' he said, touching his bonnet as respectfully as if he had been speaking to the Laird.

'Ay, Donald, a fine morning,' answered Fergus, with a sudden flash of a smile, like sunshine.

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'Ye are for the school, I see?' said Donald. 'How d'ye like in-bye? Does Peter Crerar come up to Mister Macfarlane?'

Fergus gave his bag a push on his shoulder, and a slight, tremulous smile crossed his face.

'I like Mr. Crerar very well, Donald, but I don't like the school as well as the manse.'

'Never mind, lad; it's a deescipline. The Lord has His ain ways o' workin', an' guid comes oot o' evil. Ye'll be a daur on oor deils o' laddies; Peter Crerar has his ain to dae wi' them.'

'He taws plenty, Donald. There's Malcolm Menzies on the hill near Auchloy. Is he not coming to school to-day?'

'Dear only kens. The laddie's gane wud sin' he cam' frae Glesca. I was pitten' a shae on yer uncle's meer this mornin', Maister Fergus.'

'Isn't she a beauty, Donald?' quoth the lad, his eye kindling with enthusiasm. 'When I'm a man I'll have a mare like Mora.'

'Ay, I houp sae; mony o' them, sir,' said Donald fervently, for Fergus was a prime favourite of his. 'There's the wee M'Bean comin' by Dugal Bain's. He's late.'

'So am I. Mr. Crerar never taws M'Bean nor me, and it isn't fair, for we need it as bad as the rest,' said Fergus, crossing the burn at a bound.

'He wadna like to lick you, Maister Fergus, and the wee M'Bean he daurna. Though I think wi' you, Peter shouldna mak' flesh o' ane and fish o' anither.'

Fergus laughed as he ran off, though he did not fully understand Donald's expression. He came up with the factor's son at the school door, but no greeting passed between them. Angus M'Bean, indeed, scowled at Fergus from under his heavy brows, but Fergus did not change his serene expression.

'We're late, Angus,' he said cheerily, for though he had given him a thrashing he deserved, he was not one to keep up spite.

But Angus only scowled the deeper. He was what country folk call an 'ill-kindet loon,' and there was nothing in his appearance to win approbation. He was a little, squat fellow, with a fat, freckled face, and a shock of red hair. 'Puddin'

M'Bean,' he was irreverently called among the youngsters of the Fauld, who recognised no class distinction, and hated him with a cordial hatred.

It suited the factor to send his boy for the winter months to the Fauld school, as it gave him ground for posing as a humble, unassuming man before the Laird, and he pretended to have the love of a brother and the interest of a true friend in his old neighbours. But they knew better.

On the whole, Fergus Macleod did not greatly dislike the school, though, brought up as he had been, it was certainly a change for him to sit side by side with the rough cottar lads, who stared at his kilt, and made remarks to each other in Gaelic, which he only partially understood. Peter Crerar, out of his desire to do honour to the Laird's nephew, set up a small form near his desk, and put Fergus on it, alongside Angus M'Bean; but the lad, young though he was, felt that no such distinction ought to be made, and begged that he might be allowed to sit among the rest. He was not any further forward than the bigger boys, for he was not much inclined, as yet at least, for study, and Mr. Macfarlane had not pushed him. Angus M'Bean was, no doubt, the sharpest boy in the school. In spite of the dour, slow, stupid look, his mental faculties were keen enough, and he speedily left his compeers behind. He had a profound contempt for the clachan lads, and showed it in every possible way; and though they all hated him, he had never been laid a hand on till Fergus Macleod thrashed him. He caught him one day after he had pushed wee Katie Menzies from the stepping-stones into the burn, and nearly put her into a fit with fright. These were the sort of things that amused the factor's son, so it may be guessed that there was not much love lost between Fergus and him.

The Lord's Prayer was over, and all the slates out that morning, when the door was quickly opened, and a pale-faced lad, with large, melancholy eyes, came creeping into the room. It was Malcolm Menzies, who had returned unwillingly from his wanderings. He did not like the irksome routine of the school, and Peter Crerar, having no patience with the slow, shrinking, sensitive boy, who never had his lessons ready, was

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needlessly hard upon him. No doubt, the strong, lazy urchins of Achnafauld needed the wholesome discipline of the tawse, and their brown paws could stand a very honest number of pawmies; but it was different with Malcolm Menzies. Wee Katie, who had been anxiously watching for her brother, made room on the form for him, and the boy slipped into his seat with a look of anxious fear. He was not allowed to sit on the front form with the big boys, who laughed at him, the 'toon's laddie,' as they called him, for being so backward and stupid at his lessons. The master was busy in the cupboard in the wall behind his desk, and as his back was to the scholars, he did not see Malcolm enter. But this was an opportunity for showing a mean revenge on the Menzies, which Puddin' M'Bean did not intend to let slip. So, when the master turned round and asked what the noise was, he was told that it was Malcolm Menzies coming in late. Now the master had had a good deal of trouble with Malcolm Menzies, who seemed to have no sense of the passage of time, and would come into the school at any time of the day. Only three days before he had been punished for the same offence, and Peter Crerar, being an ordinary, hot-headed young man, who thought the tawse the only way of establishing law and order in the school, made up his mind he would stand it no longer.

'Malcolm Menzies, come up!' he said, in that quiet way he was wont to assume in his sterner moods.

Poor Malcolm trembled and grew paler, if that were possible, and wee Katie began to cry quietly, with her apron to her eyes. The boys, who enjoyed, as is the manner of their kind, 'a lickin'' given to another, sat up expectantly, and Puddin' M'Bean grinned consequentially behind his slate.

'You're a mean sneak, Angus M'Bean! and I'll give it you at leave,' whispered Fergus savagely; for his hot Macdonald blood sprang up at the cowardly tell-tale.

'I'll tell the maister on you too, if you don't take care,' said Angus scowlingly. He was very brave when he was safely out of danger's way.

Meanwhile, Malcolm Menzies, positively shivering with fear, came very, very slowly up between the forms to the master's desk.

'Where have you been, eh?' asked Peter Crerar, in a loud, peremptory voice.

'Up by Auchloy. I forgot, sir; an' oh, dinna lick me, an' I'll never dae't again!' said the lad piteously, but with dry eyes. Even after the worst licking he had never been seen to cry, but he brooded over things, and suffered often a thousand times more than the rest had any idea of. The smith partially understood him, but had refrained from giving Peter Crerar any instructions about him, thinking that the ordinary drilling at school might sharpen him up a bit, and knock the sensitive shrinking out of him.

'Just so,' said the master grimly. 'Hold out your hand.'

The boy did so nervously, but put it quickly behind his back before the stroke fell. Then the master lost his temper, and fell upon him, hitting him on the shoulders and on the bare calves of his legs without mercy, but the boy never uttered a sound. Fergus Macleod could not keep his eyes away from the scene, but it made him really sick, and at last he could stand it no longer, but sprang from his seat.

'Oh, sir, don't! Stop, sir! Hit me. I'm abler than Malcolm!' he cried, and held out his brave right hand at once.

Then Peter Crerar put up his tawse, told Malcolm angrily to go back to his seat, and in his wrath actually bade the Laird's nephew hold his tongue. But it stopped the 'licking,' at which Puddin' M'Bean was grievously disappointed. Nothing pleased him better than the sight of another boy getting a good taste of the tawse. The pity was he should have so little experience of it himself. Malcolm Menzies crept back slowly to his seat, and sat down with a queer dazed look on his face. Wee Karie slipped her hand into his, and looked up into his face, her blue eyes shining with childish sympathy.

'Dinna greet ony mair, Malky,' she whispered; but Malcolm drew himself away from her touch, and when he saw the master in the press again, he rose very quietly and went out of the door like a shot, and that was the last time Malcolm Menzies ever sat upon a school form. He ran all his might into the smiddy, where Donald, in his leisurely fashion, was preparing for his work.

'Weel, lad, what is't?' he asked kindly, when Malcolm's shadow darkened the doorway.

'Oh, Donald, ask my auntie no' to let me to the schule!' said the lad, in a solemn, weary voice. 'I canna go back to the schule.'

'What way can you an' Peter Crerar no' agree? Bless me! what's the maitter wi' yer legs?'

'He did it,' said the lad, with swelling bosom. 'Oh, Donald, let me work in the smiddy or onything, but dinna let her send me to the schule. I winna gang.'

'Weel, if ye winna gang, ye winna, I suppose. Gae awa' to the peats, Malcolm, an' help to load the cairt, or I speak to yer auntie,' said the good-natured smith, who saw that the boy was fairly roused. He also feared that if practical Mary saw him she would think it her duty to send him back instantly to the school.

So Malcolm, with a look of inexpressible relief, slipped quietly away round the smithy end, and away up to the road. He had absolute faith in Donald Macalpine, and did not fear what the end would be. Before leave-time it was noticeable that Puddin' M'Bean began to grow uneasy in his seat; and some of the lads who had overheard Fergus Macleod's remark, nudged each other in delightful anticipation of another fight. But Puddin' circumvented them by remaining in the school all leave-time, hoping that by the afternoon Fergus's ire would have cooled. He had a very vivid recollection of what he had received at the same hands for knocking wee Katie into the burn, and had no wish to repeat the dose.

When the school 'scaled,' Puddin' made off; but Fergus was after him like a shot, and overtook him on the path before he had got up to the Auchloy road.

'Now then,' said Fergus, laying down his books, and looking fixedly at the scowling, fat face of the cowardly boy, 'what did you mean by telling on Malcolm Menzies? Didn't I tell you that if you meddled any of the Menzies again, I'd—I'd do for you?'

'You'd—you'd better! I'll tell my father if you touch me,' said Angus dourly, shaking in his shoes, though he was two years older, and much more stoutly built, than Fergus.

'When you're telling, be sure and tell what you were licked for, then,' said Fergus, giving him a thump between the shoulders.

By this time the whole school, like a hive of bees, were flocking up the path. Seeing he was sure to get the worst of it, Puddin' began to cry, which so exasperated Fergus Macleod that on the impulse of the moment he gave him a good push, which shoved him over the bank into the burn. The recent rain had brought it down a little in flood, and the pools were deep and the current strong. But Angus managed to scramble up the bank, and then what a shout of laughter arose from the bairns! The whole scene was so comical, that, though he was sorry for M'Bean's plight, Fergus could not help joining heartily in the laugh. Then Puddin', fairly roused, swore at Fergus, and ran off as fast as his legs would carry him to Auchloy. It was not far. About half a mile up the loch there was a fine sheltering clump of trees, in the midst of which stood Auchloy, the snug domicile of Macdonald's factor. The house, one of the shooting lodges, had recently been repaired and added to, and presented a very roomy, substantial appearance. There was a commodious steading at the back, and a well-filled stackyard, for Angus M'Bean held a large farm on the estate, and was always adding bit by bit to it. He had three children, Angus being the eldest, and then two little girls. Mrs. M'Bean, looking out of the dining-room window, saw the boy coming up the little avenue, and wondered at his dejected appearance. She came to the door to see what was the matter. When she saw him all wet, she threw up her hands in amazement.

'Mercy me, laddie! where ha'e ye been? Ha'e ye fau'n into the loch?'

In spite of her husband's ambition to be a gentleman, and her own desire to be a fine lady, Mrs. M'Bean could never learn to talk 'English,' greatly to her husband's disgust. She was a south country woman, and would have been a fine, good-natured, harmless body if she had been let alone. But her efforts to seem other than she was, and to keep up her husband's position and ambition, fretted her temper, and made her miserably unhappy. In spite of her big house, her fine

clothes, and her horse and trap, she secretly often regretted the days when she had only been a cottar's wife in Achnafauld.

At sight of his mother, Angus instantly began to blubber; and when he was drawn into the dining-room, where his father was, he managed to tell a beautiful story, which fixed all the blame on Fergus Macleod, and converted *him* into a hero.

'This is the second time Fergus Macleod has ill-used you,' said the factor angrily. 'But never mind, Angus, lad,' he added, stroking his stubbly red beard more complacently. 'The upsetting monkey! His wings are clipped already, but we'll manage to crush him yet.'





CHAPTER VIII.

AMONG THE FAULD FOLK.

So these young hearts . . .
Wandered at will.

TENNYSON.



WISH you'd hold your tongue, Sheila Murray! you're frightening the fish, and they won't bite. Lie down, Colin.'

'I'm tired seeing you fish. You can't catch anything,' said Sheila, with the delicious candour of childhood. 'Lay down your rod, and let us play. Colin can't keep still, Fergus.'

'You're just a bother, Sheila,' said Fergus, as he began to wind up his reel, for to him Sheila's word was law. They were great friends—inseparable companions, indeed—these two, though Fergus Macleod had never once crossed the threshold of Dalmore since his uncle's wife came home. Ellen Macleod had prevented him visiting the house, but she had laid no embargo on his actions outside, and had not the remotest idea of the long hours her boy and 'that woman's child' spent together. The Girron Brig was their trysting-place, and Colin their companion and protector, and the two bairns became almost necessary to each other's existence. Those long summer days spent among the hills and by the burn-side with Fergus were dreams of delight to Sheila Murray, who had been

condemned to walk out by the Tay with a prim nursemaid, or play in solitary state in the little garden surrounding the cottage at Birnam. These days were scarcely a memory to the child. She never recalled them. She was boundlessly happy at Dalmore, and all the natural sunshine of her nature had freest vent. She was full of tricks, and brimming with laughter. There was no mischief done at Dalmore in which she was not concerned, and she was just adored in the house. The servants who had served under Ellen Macleod's grim rule drew many a comparison, and blessed the day the Laird had brought home his gentle wife. She was not strong; she had not been many times at the foot of Crom Creagh since she came home, but she was serenely, boundlessly happy. Whatever her husband was to others, he was full of care and tenderness for her and for Sheila. She did not trouble her head about the child, but allowed her to run wild among the heather, and watched her bonnie face and her bare round arms taking on the sun-dye with undisturbed content, knowing what a stock of health she was laying in for the days when study and care would demand her attention.

'You don't bother your head much about Sheila, Edith,' said Macdonald one day. 'Do you know where I saw her and the boy the other afternoon in the pouring rain?'

'No, where?'

'In the middle of the peat bog at Dalreoch. Fergus is learning botany from no less a person than Rob Macnaughton in the Fauld, and he trails poor Sheila everywhere with him.'

'She is just as willing to be trailed,' laughed Edith. 'It is not among the heather, or even in wet peat bogs, any harm will come to Sheila, Graham. As long as she is a child she is safe.'

'I shouldn't wonder, now, Edith, if the bairns themselves settle the vexed question about Dalmore,' laughed the Laird; but Edith only smiled. She had no wish to anticipate the cares which encompass every mother's heart when she has a daughter to settle in life. So the bairns were allowed to wander side by side, or hand in hand, by mountain, moor, and loch, and that summer Sheila was filled with a wealth of country lore. She knew the nest of the whaup and the peesweep, the

haunt of the fox and the red deer, and the name of every wild flower which blew. That most perfect companionship between Fergus and herself laid the foundation of a deep affection which neither time nor circumstance could ever change, though it was destined to be rudely shaken by the vicissitudes of life.

'Look, Sheila,' said Fergus, laying his rod on the grass, and picking the leaf of a green plant from the marshy edge of the burn; 'these leaves eat flies.'

'I don't believe,' said Sheila promptly. 'How can a leaf eat anything? it has no mouth.'

'Bob Macnaughton showed me it; when the fly gets on the plant, it folds all its leaves over it and squeezes it dead.'

'Oh, Fergus Macleod! you horrid, cruel boy, to tell such stories!' said Sheila reprovingly. 'Girn at him, Colin. Isn't he a naughty boy?'

'I'd like to see Colin Macdonald girn at me, Sheila Murray. I'd girn him,' said Fergus, as he began to take his rod to pieces. 'I wish you were a boy, Sheila.'

'What for?'

'Because you'd like to fish, and chase hares, and all these kind of things. Girls always want to sit quiet, don't they?'

'I don't. If you don't want me, you can go away home, Fergus Macleod,' said Sheila quickly. 'I can play by myself with Colin.'

'No, you can't, or why do you always watch for me when I fish in the Girron? Besides, I never said I didn't like you. You aren't bad at all for a girl,' said Fergus graciously. 'I say, do you think you could walk to the Fauld?'

'Of course I could,' said Sheila promptly.

'Well, come on; I want to speak to Rob Macnaughton about something very special, and if you like I'll make him tell you about the mist-wraiths up Glenquaich. He's seen them. Would you be frightened, Sheila?'

'No, I wouldn't,' said Sheila; but her eyes opened wide with something like apprehension. 'What's mist-wraiths?'

'Things that live in the mountains,' answered Fergus vaguely. 'I'm not very sure myself, because, you see, I never saw them. Rob'll tell you all about them, and we can go to the smith's

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as well. Mary will give you some cakes and milk. Then you will see wee Katie Menzies that I've told you about so often. She's always at the smith's.'

'Is she nicer than me?' asked Sheila soberly.

'Sometimes,' answered Fergus, rather absently; for they had crossed over the brig, and he was looking away over at Shonnen, with a look of pain in his eyes which one so young ought not to have known.

'I don't think you're nice, anyway, Fergus,' said Sheila, in rather an aggrieved voice, as they turned up the road to the Fauld. 'You just fished and fished, and never spoke at all.'

'I was thinking, Sheila,' said Fergus; and he brushed his hand over his eyes as he looked to the long, low, white-washed kirk of Amulree. 'Sheila, what would you think if some day, when you were a big woman, you went into the kirk there, and Sandy McTavish brought up the Bible, and then opened the vestry door, and let in a new minister, not Mr. Macfarlane, and when you looked up it was me?'

'You!' Sheila stared with all her might, and then laughed right out. 'Oh, that would be funny!'

'It might be funny for you, but it wouldn't be very funny for me,' said Fergus gloomily. 'My mother says that in September, just when Uncle Graham and them are out on the hills all day, I have to go to Perth to the school, and learn to be a minister.'

'Oh, Fergus, what for?'

'She says, Sheila, that I must learn to do something, for I have no money; and that I must be a minister, because father was one, and it will be the best thing for me.'

There was a catch in the boy's voice as he spoke, and Sheila's sweet eyes filled with tears of sympathy, though she only partially understood it all.

'I'd rather dig peats all day, or be a gamekeeper like Lachlan Macrae, or break stones on the road, than go to be a minister, Sheila. I hate books and going to school.'

'But, Fergus, Uncle Graham has lots and lots of money. I'll ask him to give you money, and not let you go to be a minister, if you don't like it,' said Sheila confidently.

Fergus smiled sadly, remembering with what hot, stinging, unsparring words his mother had denounced Aunt Edith and her little girl, and how she had said they had stolen his birthright from him. She had said a great deal—more, indeed, than Fergus understood—but that point was quite plain to him. And yet it made no difference in his feeling to Sheila, who had become as necessary to his existence as light and sunshine was to Aunt Edith, who was enshrined like a saint in his boyish heart. Whatever his mother might say, he would never change towards them nor blame them in the least.

They walked a little way in silence, until, ascending one of the gentle elevations in the road, they saw Achnafauld and the silvery loch beyond shimmering in the radiance of the summer sun. A mystic, exquisite purple glow lay on the encircling hills; a long, dry, bright summer had ripened the heather, and made it bloom before its time.

'Oh, Fergus,' said Sheila, and she slipped her hand in his, 'isn't it sunny and nice? Never mind. Perhaps your mother won't send you to be a minister yet.'

Fergus smiled. The beautiful scene spread before his eyes, in all its grand solitude and peace, had its effect upon him, and soothed his vexed spirit.

'Yonder's a gig coming out of Auchloy, Sheila,' he said, pointing with his rod to the clump of trees hiding the factor's residence. 'I see Puddin' M'Bean in it.'

'Why do they call him Puddin'?' asked Sheila; and Fergus laughed at her curious pronouncing of the word. Sheila had a pure English accent yet, though she had picked up a few Highland words in her intercourse with the servants and with Fergus.

'Because he is so fat. His face is like a bannock all dabbed over with little holes, like Mary M'Glashan's scones,' said Fergus, with more force than elegance of diction; and Sheila only laughed.

Mr. M'Bean drove a high-stepping horse, and the light gig came rolling over the rough road at a splendid pace.

'Here's Lady Macleod's boy and the little girl from Dalmore, mistress,' said the factor to his wife, who was on the back of the gig. 'Take a good look at her.'

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Which Mrs. McBean certainly did, after the gig had passed the children, and the factor had duly saluted them.

'She's a dainty wee lass, Angus. The bairns are very friendly-like,' was her comment.

'Ay, that'll do i' the meantime,' said the factor significantly. 'Dalmore'll maybe come between them some day.'

'I don't like Puddin' McBean very much; do you, Fergus?' asked Sheila, who, having been greatly interested in her companion's account of his exploits at the school, had been very anxious to see him.

'I like him! I'd like to put him in the burn every day till he was all washed away,' said Fergus, who was addicted to the use of strong language, and had grown very combative of late. In fact, home influences were souring the sweet temper of the boy. Ellen Macleod had really no idea of the harm she was doing, and there was nobody honest enough or courageous enough to tell her. Macdonald, after that one futile morning call, had indeed let her severely alone, but whenever he had opportunity he heaped kind words and gifts on the boy, for his heart was sore for him.

Hand in hand the pair passed on, and turned down the first beaten path into Achnafauld. Fergus chose this way because he wanted to show Sheila the pool in the burn where Puddin' McBean had got his 'dookin';' and there he had to help her over the stepping-stones, which were nearly dry with the long drought. It was past six o'clock, and the busy clang of the anvil was at rest and the smithy empty. Fergus hoped Donald would have his supper, and that he would be smoking by the side of the peat fire, for it was then, when his own pipe smoke went curling up in beautiful unison with the peat reek, that Donald was apt to glide into his most talkative and delightful moods.

In all her wanderings with Fergus during the long days of summer, Sheila had never been in the Fauld before, nor within any of the cottars' dwellings. She opened her big brown eyes very wide as she followed Fergus through the low narrow door into the kitchen, the floor of which was white and the roof black, the rafters having been varnished with the peat reek of generations. The kitchen was the whole width of the house, and there

was a tiny window not much bigger than a port-hole, both to back and front. Then, just behind the door, there was the queerest, quaintest fire-place Sheila had ever seen in her life; just a handful of peats burning among soft brown ash on two big flat stones, and a kettle hanging on a chain above it, and singing with all its might.

A shaggy tan-coloured collie lay at full length before the fire, with a cat and two kittens on its back. On the one side there was a kind of rude couch covered with a faded tartan plaid. In the big arm-chair, by the peat bin in the wall, sat the smith himself, enjoying his evening pipe. He took it from his mouth when the children came in, and rose up to receive them, with a slow, pleased smile on his bronzed and rugged face. Sheila looked at him a little shyly, and kept close by Fergus's side, for the smith was a great big, uncouth-looking man, and the addition of an immense Scotch *bonne* on his shaggy hair did not by any means soften the general outline.

'An' this is the wee leddy from Dalmore? Mary Macalpine, here's the gentry to see ye.'

Mary came out of the adjoining room, with a motherly smile of welcome, and bade them sit down while she ran to get cakes and milk.

'We can't stay long,' Fergus exclaimed; 'because we're going over to Rob Macnaughton's to hear about the mist-wraiths.'

'Humph,' said the smith, with a smile. 'Ye ha'e surely gotten round Rob's saft side. Does he no' lock ye oot?'

'O no, never,' said Fergus. 'I like Rob, and so will Sheila. Where's Katie? She's mostly here, isn't she?'

'Ay; but Jenny Menzies, thrawn deil! has ta'en the gee, an' winna let the bairns come in. It was jealous she was of us—wasn't she, Mary Macalpine? because the bairns, puir things! liket our ingle neuk better nor her cauldribe hearth-stane. An' what are ye daein' wi' yersel' the noo, Maister Fergus?'

'Nothing. I'm going to be a minister, Donald; and if you sleep in the kirk when I'm preaching I'll cry out to you,' said Fergus, with his mouth full of oatcake.

'A minister!' The smith lifted his hands into the air.

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'As weel try to bridle the deer or cage the lark as pit goon an' bands upon you.'

'Ay, for sure,' said Mary, stroking Sheila's soft brown curls with a very tender touch.

'I'd rather apprentice with you, Donald,' said Fergus, with a melancholy smile.

'Come then, Sheila. If we're going to Rob's, it's time we were away.'

In a two-roomed house, near the roadside, dwelt Rob Macnaughton, stocking-weaver and poet of Achnaufauld. He was an unmarried man, and lived entirely by him-elf, not encouraging even his neighbours to disturb his solitude. He had a lame leg, and was not otherwise robust, though he was tall and powerfully built, and only in his prime. Fergus, with the fearless unconcern of childhood, went in and out all the Fauld houses, Rob's not excepted, and had taken kindly to the morose, strange being, who was not a favourite in the Fauld, because he was not understood. As Donald had said, Fergus had got round the stocking-weaver, who would regale him by the hour with old legends, which were too weird and fearsome to have any foundation except in his own brain. Hand in hand, then, the bairns went through the clachan, and, without ceremony, entered Rob Macnaughton's door. The loom was silent, and Rob himself was in the kitchen, sitting at the table, with an old copy-book before him and a quill pen behind his ear. He looked round in no well pleased way when he heard the sneek lifted; but his face cleared at sight of the bairns, and he rose to welcome them at once. Sheila tightened her hold on the hand of Fergus as she looked at the big, loose figure, with the thin, embrowned, withered-looking face and the straggling grey beard and shaggy brows, beneath which there gleamed a pair of deep, flashing, penetrating eyes.

'I have brought a lady to see you, Rob, and to hear about the mist-wraiths,' said Fergus, as he closed the door. 'And you must tell every word of it, to the very end.'

'Is this the sunbeam frae Dalmore?' inquired Rob, with

a strange softening of his rugged features. 'You are welcome, luach machree.'

Sheila was reassured by that smile. There is no fear in childhood until it is implanted there by others. Rob placed chairs for them round the fire, and sat down himself; but Sheila planted herself by his side, and looked wonderingly and questioningly into his face.

'Tell us a story,' she said, patting his hard knuckles with her little soft hand. That touch sent a thrill through the poet's soul.

'I'll sing ye a song, machree,' he said half dreamily. 'I was but at it when you came in.'

And, half closing his eyes, and laying one hand softly on the bright head of the child at his knee, Rob began to chant, in a low, musical voice, his own Gaelic, the sound of which kept both the children spell-bound. It was a pretty picture, rendered more so that they were all so unconscious of it. This was what Rob sang:—

MOLADH GHLEANN CUAICH.

LE IAIN MACNEACHDAINN.

Gleann nan caorach, Gleanna cuaich nan cuaidh louch,
 Cha'n eil leithid ri fhaotainn an taobh so d'on Fhraing.
 Tha fhalluing co priseil, barr fraoich 's bun cioba,
 Is neconan is millse mu d'chrichibh 's gach am
 Tha fallaineachd mhor anns a ghleannan bheag bhoidheach,
 Tha ni agus storas ann a d'choir anns gach am;
 Tha sithionn an aonich 's iasgach a chaolais
 Gu bailt ann ri fhaotainn 'us cho saor ris a bhuinn.

Tha leath-chearc 'us smudan agus coiléach an dunain,
 Boc maoisich gu luth'or a suibhal nam beann;
 Tha chaug 's na smeorach 's na badanaibh boidheach
 Fo fhasga na Sroina seinn ceol air gach crann,
 Tha ruadh-bhuic 'us maoisich 'us eildinn le'n laogh ann,
 Daimh chabhrach sraonach air aodainn nan tom,
 'S an earbag bheag laoghach bhios a com'nuidh 's an doire
 'S eoin bhachlach bheag laoghach le'n ceilceirebh binn.

Tha tarmain 's soin ruadha us lachidh chinn-uain ann,
 Maigheach ghlas a cheum nallach gach nar anns a Ghlean,

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Na codal gu guamach 's na laganaibh naigneach
Am fasga na luachrich na cuirteag gle chruinn.
'Mhair thig oirnn an Luinsd's am direadh nan stucaibh,
Bith lannachd air fudar 's luaidh dhu-ghorm na deann,
Aig mor-araibh 's aig Duicaibh, le'n cui bheara dubailt,
B'e an aighair's an sugradh tighinn deu ort 's gach am.

Tha toilinntinn ri fhaotainn ma d'ghlacaibh tha faoilidh,
Gar am biodh ach Loch Fraochidh na aonaran ann;
'S tric bha mé le'm dhiarmaid 's le'm chulae bheag riahach.
'S mo ghad air a lionadh le iasgaibh nan lann.
Tha thu creaganach, sronach, feadanach, boidheach,
Tha thu bileagach, foirl-anach, romach, glan, grinn;
Gu dearcagach, broileagach, smeuragach, oireagach,
'S gach meas bu roighneach sna coilltibh a cinn.

Cha'n fhaight am folach aon am an a d'choirsa
Ach muinean do'n choineach bu nosar glan grinn:
Fraoch comhdach nan sleibhtean fo blathas mios a chestein,
Is mil as ag eiridh mar eirthuinn nan tom.
Tha'n abhainn gu brighor a tearnadh gun sigios oirr,
Air leabaidh do'n *phelb'e* na sin ad chom,
Dol seachad na lubaibh gun smalan gun smuir oirr,
Is i ceadach am shuileabh mar shuicar glan pronn.

Struth fiorghlan mar chriostal leam 's miann bhi ga fhaicinn,
Mar fhion-dearg tha bhlas domh 's tu carach gu grinn,
'S tu sruthan is boidhche tha'n taobh so do'n Jordan,
'S ged theirinn cha bu sgleo-uisge mor Amazon.
Tha an eala re phriseil-leam 's ait bhi ga innseadh,
Gu socrach na sineadn air dilinn nan tonn;
Gu ma maireann na daoine, chosd ruit am maoinne,
Dheanamh tioram a chaolais do gach aon tha san-fionn.

Tha sruthan glan crasbhach a Gleannlochan a taomadh,
Chumas biadh agus aodach ris gach aon tha san duthaich,
Le inneramaide grinne-muillean cardaidh 'us mine—
Cha'n eil aicheadh 's a chruinne le sireadh gu cul,
Tha do ghibhtean do aireamh, aig a mbiad, is a dh 'fhas iad,
On am san robh ADI am braig cuig-punnt,
Is tu 's aileagan dhuinne thar gach ait anns a chruinne,
Chaidh ar 'n arach aunt uile, is c'um nach molamaid thu.

[The foregoing song was composed by John Macnaughton, Achnafauld, Glenquich, who died in the year 1866, aged 85. The following is a translation by A. C. :—]

PRAISE OF GLENQUAICH.

Glen where the sheep are, Glenquaich, where live brave, hardy heroes,
 Thine equal is not to be found on this side of France.
 Thy mantle's so precious of heather and mountain grass,
 With daisies so lovely abounding at all times.
 There is excellent health in that beautiful little glen,
 And cattle and riches are to be found in thy precincts.
 Venison off the hills, and fish from the loch,
 Are to be found in abundance, and as free as the water.

Grey-hens and wild pigeons and grouse from the moors,
 And roebucks so agile roam over the hills ;
 The cuckoo and mavis in the beautiful woodlands,
 In the shelter of the mountains, sing music on each bow.
 The red-deer and doe, with their frisky young offspring,
 And the stately antlered deer on the brow of the hill ;
 And the beautiful roes are at home in the thicket,
 Where the blithe feathered songsters are singing so sweetly.

There are ptarmigan and grouse, and blue-headed wild ducks,
 And the white hare with her proud step is to be found on the
 hill,
 Sleeping securely in the seclusion of the hollow,
 Cuddled up very snugly, quite near to the rushes.
 When Lammas has come, and grouse-shooting begins,
 Lords and dukes with their double-barrelled guns
 Get a plenteous supply of powder and shot,
 And their joy and their sport is to come to the Glen.

Delightful enjoyment's to be found in thy valley,
 Though there was but only Loch Fraochie there.
 Oft with my line and a little brown fly
 Have I filled my withe with the beautiful trout.
 Thou art craggy and rugged, with thy beautiful brooks ;
 Herbaceous, extensive, rough, but right clean.
 Blue, wortle, bramble, and cloud berries,
 The choicest of fruits will grow in the Glen.

Rank foggage will never be found on thy hills,
 But mountain grass and moss in the beautiful dells.
 Luxuriant heather grows on every moor,
 And the fragrance of honey is conveyed by the breeze.
 Untiringly flows the substantial river
 In its channel, a bed of the cleanest of pebbles,
 Winding cheerily on, free of mud and of dust,
 More precious in my eyes than the sweetest sugar

Thy clear stream, like crystal, I love well to see ;
Sweeter than red wine to me is thy taste.
Thou'rt a lovelier stream by far than the Jordan,
And no lie, though I say it, than the great Amazon.
The graceful swan—I am proud to declare it—
Is quietly reposing on thy watery wave.
May those generous men flourish who gave so much money
To bridge over the river for all in the Glen.

A tributary stream from Glenlochan comes foaming,
Which keeps food and clothing to each one in the place
By the excellent machinery in the meal and wool mills.
No better than these can be found anywhere.
Thy gifts without number to all who will take them
Since that time that Adam lived up in the Glen.
Thou'rt a jewel more precious than all in the world—
Why should we not praise thee, who nurtured us all ?





CHAPTER IX.

THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

O Love! who bewailest
The frailty of all things well,
Why choose you the frailest
For your cradle, your home, and your bier?

SHELLEY.



Up and down, to and fro the dining-room of Dalmore, strode Macdonald one August evening, and he had the appearance of a man in the keen throes of mental anguish. His brows were knit, and he clasped and unclasped his hands with a nervous haste as he paused now and again to listen with strained ear for any sound to come from upstairs. In the upper room, his wife, the darling of his heart, lay between life and death. Another hour, the physician had said, would decide the issue. He seemed to have been enduring this agonizing strain for hours; in reality, it was only minutes. They had sent him down. The doctor had implored him to stay in the dining-room; for his restless, hurried pacing up and down the corridor was disturbing the sick room. He had obeyed immediately. All he could do to help was to keep out of the way; but oh, they seemed careless, indifferent to his agony, though it was the light of his life who was in such fearful peril. He heard a foot on the stair at length, and sprang to the door. The doctor, a grave, middle-aged man, of eminent skill, who had come all the way from

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Edinburgh to attend at this crisis, motioned him to be silent, and, entering the room, shut the door.

'It is over,' he said briefly; 'the child is dead.'

'What is the child to me? How is my wife?'

'She cannot live,' said the doctor briefly, and, turning his head away, strode over to the window, and stood with his back to the man, not caring to look upon his anguish.

'Not live! Why not?' cried Macdonald. 'What use are you if you can do nothing for her?'

'Mr. Macdonald,' said the physician gravely, almost sadly, 'we can only do what we can. We cannot work miracles. Nothing short of a miracle could save your wife's life.'

Macdonald groaned aloud. The doctor was amazed to see such evidence of devoted love. He had not been greatly prepossessed in favour of this rough Highland laird in the hours of the last evening which he had spent in his company. He had, indeed, wondered in what curious way he had wooed and won so sweet a wife. But there was no doubt about the genuineness of the man's anguish. It was searing itself into every feature.

'Nothing can be done?' he said, calming himself by an effort, and speaking in a tone of anxious inquiry.

'Nothing. The strength is completely gone. Mrs. Macdonald has never been a very robust woman. No constitution to fall back upon.'

Such was the brief, callous explanation of the whole matter as viewed in the light of medical skill. Macdonald received it in silence.

'How long?'— He stopped short, unable to frame the question his eyes dumbly asked.

'Not long. You had better go up. She has asked for you several times.'

Without a word, Macdonald turned and marched out of the room.

Then the physician stretched himself on the couch and shut his eyes. He had been up all night, and his work was done. He was not a heartless man; but he had never married, and could not understand a husband's feelings. He was, indeed, rather sceptical about them, as a rule.

The Laird met Anne, Sheila's nurse-girl, on the stair. She was crying, with her apron at her eyes. He passed her by without a word, and strode on to the large, wide bed-chamber, with the long windows looking over to Amulree, where his wife had laid her down to die.

The nurse heard his heavy foot in the corridor, and passed out as he went in. She only slipped into the adjoining room, to be at hand if required. Macdonald only saw one gleam of the perfectly colourless face on the white pillows, and, staggering blindly across the room, he fell on his knees at the bed-side and buried his face on his arms. His action shook the whole bed, and his wife opened her eyes. Then her hand went forth very feebly, for her strength was spent, and, reaching his head, lay there content. In his deep, terrible agony, he was unconscious of that light, loving touch.

'Graham,' she said at last, in a voiceless whisper, 'Graham, look up; there are some things to say.'

He flung up his head, and his eyes dwelt upon her face lovingly, yearningly, with a look which might have drawn her back to life and health. It told of intense, undying, unutterable love. She had all his affection, for until he met her it had been lavished on none. Ellen Macleod was his only living relative, and she had not sought or won any of his love.

'It is to be a fearful trial, Graham,' whispered the dying wife feebly. 'Try to bear it. We have been so happy. I—I thank you for all'—

'Hush, hush, Edith! don't torture me!' he cried hoarsely. 'I have only known what life is since you came to Dalmore. Oh, wife, live—live for my sake!'

'I would if I could,' she whispered, and her faint smile was very sweet. 'But I must go. We cannot understand. Some day it will be made plain, and it is not for ever.'

Her hopeful words found no echo in his heart. Ah! in death's dark hour it is not easy to find comfort, even in a living hope. It sometimes seems as if our day had set in utter darkness.

The silence which followed was broken by the hasty patter of small feet in the corridor; the door was opened by a quick,

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impulsive hand, and Sheila, with a quick, sobbing cry, sprang upon the bed.

'Oh, mamma, mamma! they would not let me come!' she cried, as if her little heart would break. 'What is it? you are so white. Are you very ill, dear mamma? Is that why papa is crying?'

The mother had no strength to reply. With a last effort, she lifted the child's hand and tried to place it round Macdonald's neck.

'Kiss mamma, darling. Be good, and love and care for papa,' she whispered slowly and with difficulty. 'Graham, take care of Sheila, and don't let Ellen Macleod come near her.'

Even in death the shadow Ellen Macleod had cast on Edith's married life lay chilly on her heart.

Macdonald heard these words as in a dream. He seemed to know no more until they told him gently his wife was dead. Then he became conscious of a childish hand clinging tearfully about his neck, and, gathering himself up, he took the child to his heart, and turned away from the room without a backward glance.

Ellen Macleod was sitting at the drawing-room window at Shonnen, busy, as usual, with some knitting. On the little grassy slope before the house Fergus was lying at full length, with Colin beside him. Colin divided his time between Dalmore and Shonnen. To him it had appeared at first an extraordinary thing why the family should be separated. The dog really belonged to Fergus, his uncle having given him to the boy when he brought him home, a prize puppy, one day from the show at Inverness. But Ellen Macleod had declined to give him house-room at Shonnen; so Colin slept at Dalmore, and only visited the Lodge when he wearied for a sight of his young master.

Fergus had an open book before him, but his thoughts were far enough from study. He was thinking that it wanted but two days to the 'Twelfth,' and wondering whether Uncle Graham would let him handle a gun this year, as he had promised. It was life to him to be out of doors. Do what

they would, they would never make a student of him. Ellen Macleod knew this right well, but the knowledge did not make her waver in her decision. An heir was expected at Dalmore, so her last hope was extinguished.

'Fergus, isn't that Jessie Mackenzie running up the road?' she asked, putting her head out of the open window, and pointing along towards Amulree.

'Yes, mother; what's she flying like that for?' asked Fergus, turning on his side, and shading his eyes from the glow of the sunset.

'I can't tell; it is most extraordinary. She only went an errand to the inn for me.'

They were not long kept in suspense. The girl came hurrying up to the Lodge, in by the back entrance, and straight to the dining-room door, and opened it without knocking. Through the open window Fergus heard quite plainly every word she spoke.

'Oh, ma'am, Mrs. Macdonald's dead!'

'What?'

Ellen Macleod sprang to her feet, and her face flushed all over.

'Quite true, ma'am; at twenty minutes past six; an' the baby, a son, is dead too. Oh! oh! what a day for Dalmore!' and the warm-hearted girl wrung her hands in token of her distress.

'Jessie Mackenzie, the thing is impossible! Mrs. Macdonald was alive and well, out in the garden, I was told, no later than yesterday.'

'Ah, but that's not to say she's alive this day. Oh, it's too true, ma'am. Word came down from Dalmore to Macpherson, and he's driving the doctor in to Dunkeld to catch the train.'

'Dead!' Ellen Macleod turned away, and, approaching the open window, stood there in stony silence. She saw Fergus, with Colin at his heels, already crossing the Braan by the stepping-stones he had rolled down himself before the Lodge to make a quick cut to Dalmore. She knew where the boy was going. She pictured him even entering the house, while she repeated to herself the one word—dead! The woman who had supplanted her had not long enjoyed the place she had usurped.

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Dead! That bright, sweet, gracious woman, whose girlish beauty had made many wonder at Macdonald's luck. Dead! It was an awful thought. Her hard, proud mouth quivered, not with grief, for she felt none, but with the sheer violence of the physical and mental shock. Meanwhile, Fergus was running with all his might up to Dalmore. There was nobody about the outhouses, and when he got round to the front entrance he found the door wide open. As he stepped into the hall he was struck by the strange brooding silence in the house. He started when the clock struck eight. Colin had his tail between his legs, and was suspiciously sniffing the air. Suddenly, without any warning, he gave vent to a long, mournful howl, which made Fergus shiver, and brought two servants hurrying up from the kitchen to see what it meant.

'It's only Colin, Christina,' said the boy, with a faint, sickly smile; and, taking him by the collar, he dragged him out to the stable and shut him in.

'Is it true that my uncle's wife is dead, Hamish?' he asked the stable-boy, who was lounging at the coach-house door with his hands in his pockets.

Hamish nodded stolidly; and Fergus went away round to the front door again, and entered the house. He did not know what he wanted, or what made him stay. He could not believe that Aunt Edith, who only a few days ago had stopped her carriage on the road to lean out and kiss him, could be lying cold and still, as he remembered seeing his father lie at the manse of Meiklemore. He wanted to see his Uncle Graham or Sheila, just to make sure that this terrible thing had really happened. He looked into the dining-room, but it was empty. The door of his uncle's own room on the opposite side of the corridor was wide open, and there was nobody in it. With noiseless step and bated breath, Fergus crept upstairs to the drawing-room. He heard the sound of whispering voices and hurrying feet on the upper floor, but nobody came to disturb him. The drawing-room door was a little ajar, and when he looked in, he saw crouched up on the deerskin rug a little figure in a crumpled white frock. It was Sheila, poor motherless lamb! fast asleep, with the big tears lying wet on her white

cheeks, and fringing her long brown lashes. It was past her bed-time, but they had forgotten all about her; while she, poor child! had forgotten *her* sorrow in the deep slumber of childhood. A lump rose in the boy's throat, and he turned away. Not given much to tears, his eyes were full at sight of Sheila. Just as he slipped away downstairs, he met Mrs. Cameron, the housekeeper, who looked surprised to see him.

'Where have ye come from, Maister Fergus?' she asked, in a whisper. 'This is a sad, sad day for Dalmore. Will you come up and see our sweet leddy? She's like a angel in her sleep.'

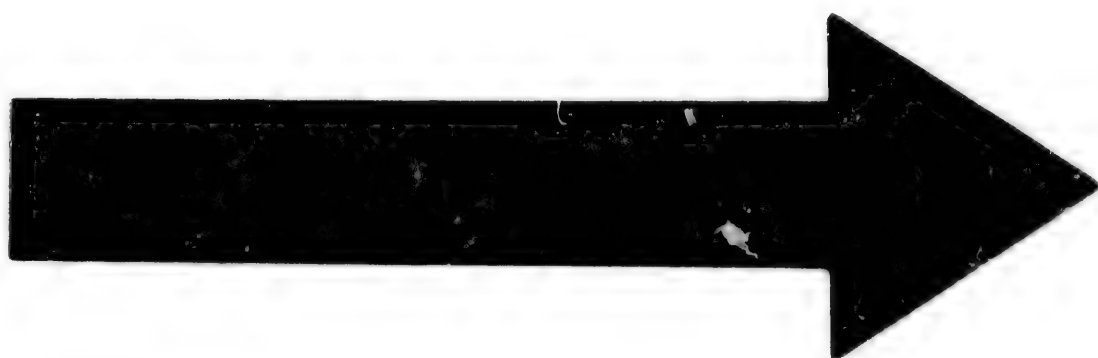
The boy shivered, but there was a fascination in the thought. He could not really believe that Aunt Edith was dead unless his own eyes convinced him. So he nodded, and followed the housekeeper upstairs once more. Their work was done in the chamber of death. Loving hands had performed the last service on earth for the beloved mistress of Dalmore, and when Fergus stole softly, fearfully almost, into the room behind the servant, he was conscious of a curious peace which fell upon him. The blinds were drawn, but the sunshine she had loved stole through, and made a mellow radiance in the room. They had removed from the room everything which could suggest the brief, sharp struggle which had snapped the thread of life, and there she lay, white, calm, peaceful, with her hands folded, and a sprig of white heather on her breast. The face was uncovered, and it seemed to Fergus that she looked as if she had been asleep; there was even a faint smile on the sweet mouth. She had left a blessed memory behind, even in the heart of the boy to whom her smile and her motherly kindness had been like the wine of life. If Ellen Macleod had but known what was passing in her son's heart at that moment, she would have been jealous of her rival even in death. But *that* was a thing Fergus Macleod never spoke of until years after, and it was to one who shared with him the regret that a life so precious should have been so prematurely ended.

'That will do, thank you, Mrs. Cameron,' he said gently. 'Would you let me have a bit of that heather just to keep, that little bit touching her hand?'

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The housekeeper sobbed aloud, as, with reverent hand, she broke the little spray from the stem and gave it into the boy's hand. His grief was not noisy, but she saw that it was profound. As Fergus Macleod went downstairs he kissed the sprig of white heather, and in that kiss a vow was hid. What it was we may not yet know, but it made a man of our hero, and filled him with a manly resolve.

He did not go back to the drawing-room. Young though he was, he felt that sleep was merciful to Sheila. There would be plenty of time to-morrow for her to cry her heart out anew for what she had lost. The sun had set when he went out of doors again, and the sky beyond Glenquaich was a wonder of glorious loveliness. There seemed to be a solemn hush in the air, but there was nothing sad or melancholy to add to the natural grief. Nay, it was as if the Angel of Death, in his swift passage, had left an abiding peace on Dalmore. Fergus went to the stable for Colin, and turned his face down the hill. But the dog would not follow. He rushed to and fro, whining uneasily, and finally set off round by the stable and up through the firs towards the crest of Crom Creagh. Fergus had the curiosity to follow him, not being in any special hurry to go back to Shomen. He felt, though he could not express or understand it, that his mother would break the spell of peace which lingered about Dalmore, and that she would fret him and make him miserable about his aunt. He was only a child, but experience was teaching him. He had visions and perceptions far beyond his years. He could even weigh motives in the balance, and discriminate between right and wrong, justice and injustice, with marvellous precision. He had thus no real childhood. But for the wholesome influences of the out-door world in which he lived so much, he must have grown up an unnatural, unloveable being. But nature is a kind mother. She saved her boy. Colin was far ahead, leaping over heather and bracken, and clearing the burns and the boulders with fleet step, as if he had an end in view. At last Fergus lost sight of him, but, following in his wake, came upon a sight which made him suddenly burst into tears. There was the solitary, mournful figure of his Uncle Graham, sitting on a boulder under the



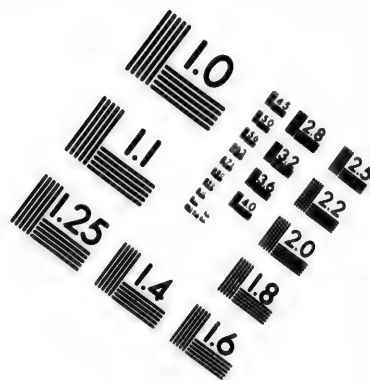
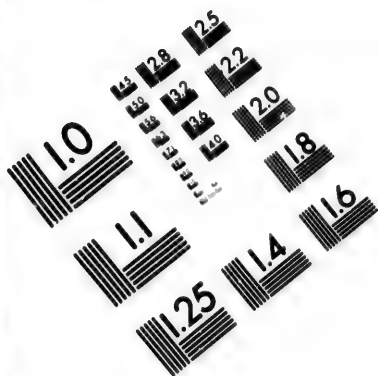
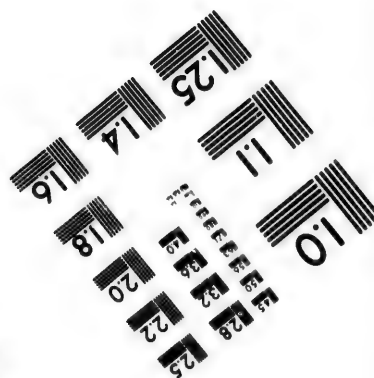
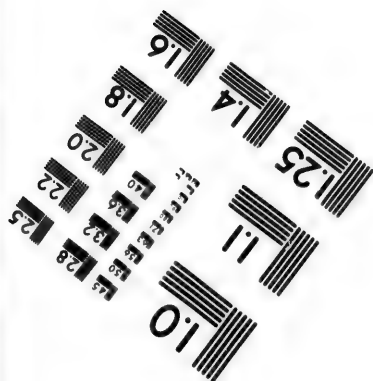
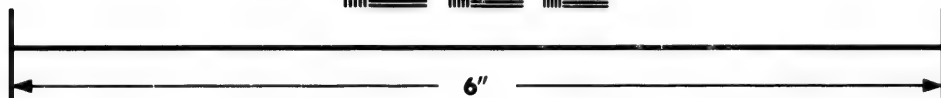
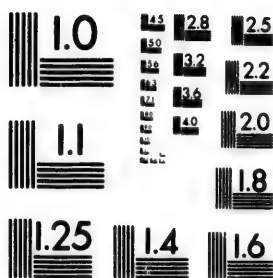


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frowning crest of Crom Creagh, with his head deep buried in his hands, fighting his lone, silent battle where no eye but God's could see him. But the faithful dog, with a keenness of intuition which seemed more than instinct, had found him out, and now lay at his feet with his head on his knees, whining piteously, with his almost human eyes fixed upon the bowed head.

Fergus crept up to his uncle's side, laid his arm round his neck, and whispered brokenly,—

‘Oh, Uncle Graham, don't cry!’

A shudder ran through Graham Macdonald's stalwart frame, and a deep groan escaped his lips. He moved his hand, and it touched Colin's head. He never spoke, but patted the faithful collie, and then looked up at Fergus with a strange, melancholy smile.

‘Ay, Fergus lad,’ was all he said; and then his eye wandered away beyond the roof of Dalmore to the sweet valley of Glenquaich, where the loch lay gemmed with the ruddy blush of the sunset on its breast. It was a picture she had loved, and never again would her eyes rest upon it. It had lost its beauty for him. From that day the world was a changed world for Macdonald of Dalmore.



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CHAPTER X.

ESTRANGED.

Go! Darken not, by alien voice and look,
The place made sacred by her memory!



It was all over. The Lady of Dalmore had been borne to her rest at Shian by the strong arms of those who loved her, and laid down on the green hillside within sight of the silver loch, while Blind Rob's pipes played the mournful notes of 'The Land o' the Leal.' It was a great gathering—a 'beautifu' buryin', the Fauld wives said to each other, as they sobbed over the untimely end of the sweet Lady of Dalmore. It was as if nature mourned with her human creatures, for a dreary, wet mist hung low over mountain, moor, and loch, like a pall.

And when it was all over, Graham Macdonald went back to his dreary home, where a white-faced child in a black frock was wandering desolately through the house, crying for the mother that would never come again.

From the upper window at Shonnen, Ellen Macleod watched the funeral train leave Dalmore and wend its way along by the Achnafauld road towards Shian. But the intervening distance was too wide to permit her to distinguish the different carriages and equipages which made up the long, imposing train. It was a great gathering, for even in the few short months Edith

Macdonald had reigned in Dalmore she had made for herself many friends. Fergus was very wet when he returned to Shonnen late in the afternoon, for the mist-wraiths had drooped their wings lower and lower, until they too dropped tears for the Lady of Dalmore. After he had changed his dress and come to the dining-room, his mother found him absent and uncommunicative.

'It was a great burying, Fergus,' she said. 'I could not make out the coaches. Who were all there?'

'I don't know, mother. It was a great crowd.'

'Who let down the coffin, then? You can surely tell that.'

'Uncle Graham at the head, mother, and I was at the foot, beside Sir Douglas Murray. Lord Dunloch was at one side, and General Macpherson at the other. I don't know the rest.'

'What ministers had you at the house?'

'I don't know them, mother, except Mr. Macfarlane. There were others there, I think,' said the boy wearily, for the questioning hurt him. He had been sufficiently saddened by the event of the day. He could not bear to discuss every trifling element in it, as his mother evidently desired. She was consumed with curiosity—had, indeed, felt a kind of surprised chagrin at the great turn-out of well-known people at her sister-in-law's burying.

'Were there any ladies at the house?'

'Only Lady Ailsa Murray.'

'Did you hear anything about any arrangements? Is the little girl to go to Murrayshaugh?'

'Sheila? Oh, I don't think so. I hope not,' said Fergus quickly. 'Uncle Graham won't let her, I am sure. She sat on his knee all the time of the service in the dining-room.'

Dinner was served just then, and the subject was laid aside. But Ellen Macleod pondered certain things in her mind for the rest of that day. The violence of the shock the sudden death had given her had worn off, and she had felt a strange

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thrill that very afternoon when the funeral train passed by; for the interloper was gone, and there was nothing now to stand between Fergus Macleod and Dalmore. She had already settled in her own mind that the child Sheila would return to the Murrays; for of course she had not the shadow of a claim to expect a home at Dalmore. And, after a time, when the way was smoothed, and past differences between her brother and herself healed by a little diplomacy on her part, she pictured herself and Fergus reinstalled at Dalmore.

It had been a trial of no ordinary kind for her proud spirit to stoop to the obscurity of Shonnen Lodge. She had not spoken to Macdonald for months, but she had no doubt that he would feel the need of her help at this crisis.

Between the death and the burying, however, no message had come from Dalmore—not even a formal notification of the event—neither was she asked up to the house for the service of the funeral day. She knew that Lady Ailsa had come up the day after Mrs. Macdonald's death, and had not returned to Murrayshaugh. So she attributed the lack of attention shown to herself to the officious interference of Lady Murray, and resolved to bide her time until Dalmore should be restored to solitude. A few more days passed by, and as no message came from Dalmore, Ellen Macleod made up her mind to go up and find out for herself how matters stood. She had no means of knowing whether her brother was alone, or whether Lady Murray still remained, and her curiosity could no longer be restrained.

Fergus had gone off for a long day's fishing on the loch; so, early in the afternoon, Ellen Macleod left Shonnen, and, crossing over by Fergus's stepping-stones, walked slowly up to Dalmore. She had not crossed the Girron Brig for eleven months, since the day she had left Dalmore, a week before her brother's marriage. She was not a sentimental woman, and she felt no thrill of feeling as she entered upon the familiar carriage-way. Her interest in Dalmore was of a very practical kind, chiefly made up of pride and greed.

But she did think, when she reached the tableland and turned

into the avenue gate, that the place had never looked so bonnie. It had never been kept in such condition in her day. There was not a weed nor a bare spot on the smooth gravel, and the turf was closely shaven, and looked like finest velvet. Edith had planted some Dijon rose-trees before the door, and they had taken kindly to the soil, and were covered with bloom and bud. On either side of the door were two huge terra-cotta vases filled with white heather, a mass of delicate bloom. Wherever Edith Macdonald was, she gathered pretty things about her, and she had loved her new home with a loving pride, and found delight in its adornment. As for Macdonald, though he did not understand all she did, he knew that never had the house been so pleasant to live in. Ah! it had been blessed by the sunshine of a sweet woman's presence only long enough to make the desolation more awful to bear.

These frivolities about the outside of Dalmore did not please Ellen Macleod. 'Any cottar can cover his walls with roses,' she said to herself, thinking they detracted from the dignity of Dalmore. She hesitated at the open door, not knowing why she should hesitate. Her hand even was on the bell to announce her presence; but, with a short laugh, she hastily recovered herself, and walked in. Why should *she* crave admission to Dalmore? She knew where she would be likely to find her brother, but she elected to seek her way to the drawing-room, possibly to see what changes the new wife had wrought there. She scarcely knew the room, though the furnishings were the same; but the things were all shifted from the places they had occupied for a hundred years or more, and there were some pert, new-fangled little chairs and tables standing in every odd corner, and so many plants and cut flowers that it was more like a greenhouse than the sober reception-room at Dalmore. The faded moreen curtains were all removed from the windows, and in their place hangings of some dainty Indian muslin, tied back with broad bands of bright yellow ribbon, swayed to and fro in the gentle autumn wind. But, worst of all, there was a fine new piano, a semi-grand, with a beautifully inlaid ebony case, open, as the poor

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Ellen Macleod had the curiosity to go forward and look at the maker's name, and when she saw it was an Erard she frowned, knowing what it must have cost.

'Oh, what a fool he must have been, when he allowed all this!' she muttered to herself, as she took a final survey of the room ere she left it, though she did not know it, for the last time. 'I'll sweep away all that flimsy nonsense, and send back the plants to their proper place. I hope she hasn't torn up the good moreen curtains, that cost a guinea a yard if they cost a penny.'

She drew the door behind her, and, sweeping majestically downstairs, made her way to the library door.

In the hall Anne Ross met her, and stared in blank amazement. But Mrs. Macleod, without deigning to notice her, turned the door-handle of the library door, and marched in. Macdonald was sitting at his *escritoire*, with his back to the door.

At the first glance his sister was struck by his bent shoulders and the greyness of his hair. From behind he looked like an old man.

She had advanced into the room before he turned his head. When he did look round, he rose at once, pushed his chair to one side, and looked her straight in the face. There was neither recognition nor friendliness in that look.

'Well,' he said curtly, 'what do you want?'

The brief, keen question, the icy coldness of his manner, and the flash in his deep-set eye, were slightly disconcerting to Ellen Macleod, though she was not a timid woman.

'You needn't snap my head off, Macdonald,' she said, with admirable coolness, and sitting down as she spoke. 'I've come to talk matters over with you.'

'What matters?'

'Family affairs, of course. I was sorry to hear of your loss, though you may not believe it.'

A slight, very slight, smile, which had nothing pleasant in it,

curled Macdonald's straight upper lip. It was all the answer or thanks she received. 'I have no family affairs to discuss with you, Ellen,' he said briefly. 'So you have had your walk in vain.'

'You have not been very civil to me at this time, Macdonald,' said Ellen Macleod, determined to take a high hand or none. 'I say nothing about not receiving any notice of the event, or about the slight put upon me by your asking a stranger to dispense your hospitalities at this time. I have nothing against Lady Murray; I know her to be a kind friend both in sickness and health; but whatever difference was between us, Macdonald, my place was to be at Dalmore on Friday.'

Macdonald's brow darkened, his lips twitched, and his nostrils dilated with the passion he was trying to hold and curb. It was *her* memory which helped him in this moment of keen trial.

'Ellen,' he said, and his voice shook with the very violence of the effort he was making to restrain his anger, 'I wish to have no words with you, and I cannot conceive for what reason you should have forced yourself upon me at this time. You had better go quickly away back to Shonnen. I am quite capable of managing my own affairs without your interference.'

But Ellen Macleod had no such intention. She had been so accustomed in the past to her brother's fits of anger and to his use of strong language, that his moderate speech and apparent calmness completely deceived her.

'I don't want to interfere with your management of your affairs. I only want to know something of your plans. I suppose the child will go back to the Murrays?'

'What child?'

'Your wife's, the little girl Murray. Her father's people will be going to take her?'

'What is that to you?'

'Oh, nothing much, of course. If you are going to keep her for a while, of course I have no business, and I'll do my duty by her.'

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'Yes. Don't be a fool, Macdonald. You cannot be contemplating anything so absurd as to live here alone when I am alone at Shonnen. The sooner we slip back into the old way the better. It will be in your interest as well as mine.'

'I am very much obliged to you, but it will be better for us both, now that we are apart, to keep so,' he said quietly, though he was tempted to express himself much more strongly. 'If any good feeling has prompted you to come here to-day, I thank you for it, and I wish you good-day.'

Ellen Macleod rose to her feet. Amazement, indignation, incredulity possessed her.

'Do you mean to say I am not to come back to Dalmore, Macdonald; that the place is to be at the mercy of servants? You don't know what you are doing. They'll devour your substance, and rob you right and left. Have you taken leave of your senses?'

'No, but you evidently have,' he said angrily. 'Do you know, that for you to come here after—after all that is past' (he dared not mention his wife's name), 'expecting to be even civilly spoken to, is a height of presumption I scarcely imagined even you to be capable of? While I am in my right mind, Ellen Macleod, you shall never enter this house as resident or guest, though you are my sister. You have never acted a sister's part to me.'

Ellen Macleod's long thin lips grew pale with passion. Her hot Highland blood was up. She positively glared at the cold, calm countenance of her brother, as if she could have slain him where he stood.

'So this is what Edith Murray, with her sneaking ways, has done? I shall be hearing next that Dalmore is to go to her child'—

'Hold your tongue! How dare you take that name on your lips?' thundered Macdonald, his face purple with righteous anger, his eyes flashing, and the veins on his forehead standing out like knotted cords. 'The place she sanctified, and made a home such as it never was, and never will

be again, is desecrated with your presence. Get out of my sight, woman! lest I forget myself, and lift my hand against you.'

'Well, I go, but I leave my curse upon you and Dalmore!' she almost screamed; for her anger had risen to white heat, and, gathering her skirts in her hand, she swept out of the room. As she slammed the door after her, a thrill of childish laughter came in through the open door, and, as she stepped into the hall, Sheila, with her hands full of wild flowers, came dancing in. She stopped short at sight of the tall, dark-browed woman, sweeping like a Nemesis through the hall. At sight of the sweet, innocent baby face uplifted in wonder upon her, an evil spirit seemed to enter into Ellen Macleod, and, lifting her hand, she gave the child a blow on her bare white shoulder, which made her scream out in terror and pain. Aunt Ailsa, who had been up Crom Creagh with her little pet, and had but lingered at the door to pick some dead buds from Edith's rose-trees, appeared in the doorway, and saw the act.

'May God forgive you, Ellen Macleod!' she said, her fair face flushing in shame and anger. 'You are a cruel, wicked woman!'

Then she sprang forward, and gathered the bairn close to her sweet, motherly breast, and pressed her loving lips to the red mark Ellen Macleod's cruel hand had made. Macdonald heard the scream, and came out into the hall just as Lady Ailsa had lifted Sheila in her arms.

'What is it?' he asked; and at sound of her father's voice Sheila raised her tearful face, and pointed to her arm.

'Oh, papa! a black woman struck me. I am so frightened.'

Macdonald took the child in his arms, and bent his dark face over her. Ailsa Murray saw that his features were still working convulsively, and that he seemed under the influence of strong feeling. She surmised that a stormy interview had just passed between the brother and sister, but her delicacy prevented her alluding to it.

Macdonald himself broke the awkward silence.

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Ailsa,' he said; 'and, God knows, she had need. She is a fearful woman.'

Lady Ailsa sighed, and followed Macdonald to the library. The occurrence had made an opportunity for her to speak concerning Sheila's future.

'It is time I was home, Macdonald. My boys are wearying for me and for Sheila. She is expected at Murrayshaugh.'

'Is she?'

Lady Ailsa fancied Macdonald's arms tightened round the child, who clung to him with a confidence which had no fear in it.

'Sir Douglas and I have discussed the matter. We will adopt Sheila, and you know she will be like our own.'

'You are very kind, but Sheila belongs to me.'

Lady Ailsa looked a little put out. 'If there is any chance of your sister coming even occasionally to Dalmore, I am afraid I must insist on taking Sheila away,' she said firmly. 'I cannot have her subjected— to—that.'

'You need not be afraid. Ellen Macleod has set foot for the last time in Dalmore. Edith left the child to me, but if it will please you better, Sheila herself shall decide.'

He sat down, and placed Sheila on his knee. She was not much hurt, and her sobbing had ceased.

'Listen to me, bairn,' he said. 'Aunt Ailsa is going away home, and she wants to take you away to Murrayshaugh to live altogether.'

Sheila gravely nodded.

'You will have a great many advantages there, my bairn. For Aunt Ailsa loves you very much, and you would have your cousins to play with. Dalmore is a very dull place. There is only me.'

'And Fergus,' put in Sheila promptly. 'Do you want me to go away, papa?'

'No, Sheila. I want you to choose for yourself,' was all he said, and would not tempt her even by one persuasive or endearing word.

Sheila sat up, as if she felt the gravity of the moment. She

looked towards Aunt Ailsa, who was standing by the table, with a slightly expectant smile on her face. Then she looked at Macdonald's grave, stern face, which was ploughed with the lines of grief, and as if some intuition told her who needed her most, she put her arms round his neck, and hid her face on his broad breast.

Sheila's choice was made.



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CHAPTER XI.

A WILY PLOTTER.

No means too humble, road too steep,
For when he cannot walk, he'll creep.

J. B. G. SELKIRK.

THE month of October came. Peter Crerar began the teaching in Achnafauld again, but Fergus Macleod was not sent to share the advantages of the Fauld school. Neither were the lessons at the manse renewed, and time hung heavily enough on his hands. The schools were all open in Perth for the winter session, and Ellen Macleod had quite determined that Fergus should go to Perth, but she could not surmount the difficulty of getting backward and forward to Shonnen. It was impossible the boy could walk the distance between Dunkeld and Amulree twice a day after the train had brought him from Perth; and she was in a dilemma. Donald, the pony, was still eating his head off in Dalmore stable, never out except when Sheila occasionally got on his back. All communication had ceased between Shonnen and Dalmore. After all the excitement and the stir of the mournful event was over, an unbroken stillness settled down on Dalmore. Ellen Macleod had never seen her brother since that fruitless visit to Dalmore, but she heard them say he was a changed man. He was seldom seen out of doors, and Jessie told her that the housemaid at Dalmore assured her

the Laird seldom left the house. Many pitied the motherless little girl, left in the care of such a moody, miserable man; but they might have spared their pity, for she was perfectly happy. Macdonald unbent only to her, and the two seemed to have come to a most perfect and beautiful understanding. She missed Fergus very much, it is true, and often spoke of him, but her father did not encourage her. For the time being there was a firm, fast barrier drawn betwixt Shonnen and Dalmore.

Angus M'Bean, always on the look-out, and cognizant of everything going on in the country-side, got to know of the strait Mrs. Macleod was in about her boy's education, and made a nice little plan, which was to relieve her and be of ultimate benefit to himself. In the factor's eyes Fergus Macleod was the future Laird of Dalmore, and, as such, a person of no mean importance. So, having laid his plan, Angus M'Bean made bold to walk over to Shonnen, one fine, hard night, to have a little private talk with Mrs. Macleod. The factor was a very diplomatic man, and it was his policy never to quarrel with anybody. The cottars could not, with truth, say they had ever seen him in a passion, but he had a cold, pitiless way of getting the better of every one who argued with him, that they feared him quite as much as if he gave way to anger. Now, though Angus M'Bean was employed in and supposed to be devoted to the Laird's interests, it was to his ultimate advantage to keep on good terms with the lady at Shonnen, and therefore he determined to be of service to her in this difficulty if he could.

'Good-evening, Mr. M'Bean,' said Ellen Macleod, greeting him very cordially, for it was a rare occurrence to see a face from the outer world in the solitude of Shonnen. 'I hope you are all well at Auchloy?'

'All very well, thank you. How are you, Mr. Fergus? A big, tall gentleman he has grown of late, hasn't he, ma'am?'

'There's nothing to hinder his growth,' said his mother. 'Pull in the arm-chair for Mr. M'Bean, Fergus, and go to your lessons. There is frost in the air to-night, surely; it feels chilly.'

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'Ay, it is taking in the roads already,' said M'Bean, as he stretched out his hands to the cheerful fire. 'We have long, cold winters in the strath.'

'Cold enough,' answered Mrs. Macleod, resuming her knitting. 'Anything fresh about Auchloy or Achnafauld?'

'Nothing in Auchloy, but there's aye a stir in the Fauld,' laughed the factor. 'I have come for a little talk with you, if you will kindly grant me the privilege, Mrs. Macleod.'

'Surely. Take your books to the kitchen beside Jessie Mackenzie, Fergus, and stay till I bid you come back.'

Nothing loth—for he had no special regard for the factor—Fergus gathered up his books and retired.

'A fine, tall, handsome fellow,' repeated Angus M'Bean. 'He'll be a man in no time. He is pursuing his studies at home, I see. Perhaps he did not get much advantage from Peter Crerar?'

'Oh, he learned well enough at the Fauld school, but it could not go on, Mr. M'Bean,' said Ellen Macleod significantly, 'and he had spirit enough not to like it. It's not a convenient place this for bringing up children in.'

'That's just what I feel. We've been positively in a fix about our own Angus,' said the factor. 'He hates Peter Crerar, and was learning nothing from him. We have made up our minds to send him to Perth Academy, and he goes down on Monday.'

'And how are you to manage with him? He cannot come home every day,' said Ellen Macleod, laying down her knitting, and looking with interest at the factor.

'Oh no, ma'am; that would be impossible. He is to bide in Perth. We have taken lodgings for him with a respectable, genteel person, a widow woman who has come down in the world. And I made bold to come over to-night, to see if you would not consider whether the lads could not go together and share the lodging. They have always been very friendly,' said the factor, stretching a point, for 'Puddin' was always running down Fergus Macleod at Auchloy. 'Of course,' added M'Bean modestly, 'we feel that he would be greatly honoured

in having Mr. Fergus for a school companion, and if it is presumptuous on my part to make the suggestion, I ask your pardon. But I said to Mrs. M'Bean, "Whatever may have happened, we still owe respect to Mrs. Macleod, and if we can be of service to her, it need not interfere with our duty in other quarters."

'You are a good man, and a kind friend, Angus M'Bean,' said Ellen Macleod quickly, 'and I shall gratefully accept your offer for my son. Although circumstances are changed with me, I am thankful to say it will not stint me to pay the half of the lodging, and one day I hope to repay your kindness in a more substantial way than by words of thanks.'

'Don't speak of it, ma'am, I entreat you,' said M'Bean effusively. 'The kindness and the honour received are all on one side. So that is settled; and, if quite convenient for you, I can drive Mr. Fergus, with his trunk, down with Angus on Monday afternoon. I am to go in to Perth to see them nicely settled, and if you would care to go, ma'am'—

'Oh no, thank you. I have the fullest confidence in you, Mr. M'Bean. You have relieved my mind of a heavy load. That I should have to say that the Laird of Dalmore has cast off the responsibility of his sister's fatherless boy!'

'Ah well, ma'am, you see, when strangers step in, the consequences are always more or less disastrous,' said M'Bean sympathetically. 'When the Laird honoured me with his confidence anent his marriage, I made bold, though respectfully, as a servant should, to warn him against these consequences. But a wilful man must have his way.'

It cost Angus M'Bean no effort or qualm of conscience to tell a good, straightforward lie; for the Laird had never alluded to his marriage to the factor even in the most distant way, and as to listening to his advice, had it been proffered, he might have knocked him into the Girron burn, provided it had been at hand.

Ellen Macleod—shrewd, keen, clever woman though she was—was completely taken in by the smooth-tongued factor, whom even Fergus disliked and distrusted.

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'The Laird seems to have made a hermit of himself since his wife's death,' she said presently. 'He is not taking that interest in his affairs incumbent upon him.'

'No. I have said to my wife more than once that I would not be surprised to see a new laird in Dalmore before very long,' said M'Bean cautiously, and keeping his eye furtively fixed on the face of the woman before him.

She started visibly.

'Is my brother ill in his health, Mr. M'Bean? In spite of his unbrotherly treatment of me, which I cannot think you are ignorant of, I have a sisterly interest in him. I pray you, tell me how he is.'

'He has no positive ailment, except brooding over his loss. But we know what happens when a strong man gives up his interest out of doors, and sits perpetually in the house. You have not seen him of late, then?'

'No; for Sabbath after Sabbath the Dalmore pew is empty, save for the child and her nurse,' said Ellen Macleod, compressing her thin lips till they were like a thread.

Angus M'Bean saw at once where the sore spot lay, and treasured it in his mind for future consideration.

'He looks much older, then. You would scarcely know him. Forgive my presumption, but it is out of respect for the house I speak. It is a shame that Alastair Murray's child should enjoy the privileges of Dalmore, while its rightful heir learns his lessons beside the kitchen fire in a place like this.

Ellen Macleod's colour rose hotly, and her lips twitched. It was such a relief to allude to the wrong which was eating her heart out, that she forgot her usual haughty pride, and spoke out freely to a servant.

'Ay; it is, as you say, a shame and a black disgrace!' she said fiercely. 'But do you think that for this no punishment will fall on Dalmore? Heaven is more just than men, so let that white-faced girl beware. And let the Murrays watch themselves also, if they think to feather their nest from Dalmore.'

'It is a sad and difficult case, ma'am; and though I am bound to do the Laird's work outside, my sympathies and service are at your command,' said the factor impressively. 'There is no way whereby this child could be removed from Dalmore?'

'No; but if Macdonald's health is failing he must be watched, Angus M'Bean, or these vultures from Murrayshaugh will get Dalmore among their fingers.'

'Oh no, Mrs. Macleod; the Laird will never put Dalmore past your son.'

'Will he not? I tell you he is fit enough to leave it to his wife's child. He has been a fool ever since he married—a soft, silly fool; and he worshipped her as no human being should worship another, and so, in righteous wrath, Heaven took her away. I am perfectly powerless, Angus M'Bean, so you must watch over the interest and the honour of Dalmore. And if my son ever comes to his own, you shall not be forgotten.'

'I am honoured by your confidence, ma'am. Rest assured it is not misplaced,' said the factor, as he rose to his feet. 'I hope, however, that the Laird will never do anything so unbefitting a Macdonald.'

Ellen Macleod shook her head.

'My confidence in him is destroyed,' she said. 'Tell me, Mr. M'Bean, how matters are on the estate. Jessie, my maid, tells me the cottars in the Fauld are grumbling a good deal.'

'True enough. They are an ill-conditioned set. Goodness knows what demands they'll have at rent-day this year. Donald Macalpine wants a new smiddy, and the precentor a roof on his byre; and that body, Janet Menzies, is to ask her rent down because she's got Jock's bairnies home. A pack of wolves, Mrs. Macleod. They'd tear Dalmore to pieces, and fight over its division. If I had my way, I'd clean out the whole clachan.'

'That'll never be,' said Ellen Macleod, shaking her head. 'Time sare indeed changed from what they were in my father, the old Laird's time. They said he was a hard man, and yet

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there never was a grumble from a tenant in the place. I would like to ask the cottars in Achnafauld how they would like to pay tithes in kind over and above their rents, as they do in Shian and all up the glen to Rannoch. I think maseh they need a harder hand than Macdonald's on them. There must be money in the Fauld.'

'Money! Thousands of pounds, if there's a penny. It's an unholy greed that's got possession of them, and I'm of your opinion, that the Laird's too soft with them. I can tell you, Mrs. Macleod, I don't eat the bread of ease. You'll not hear a good word of me from one end of the glen to the other.'

With which remarkably true statement, delivered in a tone of injured but conscious virtue and innocence, Mr. Angus McBean took his leave, well pleased with his night's mission. But he would need to go very warily, and not lose sight of his interest with Macdonald. There is always danger in the way of the man who tries to sit between two stools.

So the difficulty about Fergus's schooling was solved very satisfactorily—for his mother, at least. The boy himself received the first intimation of it from Puddin', whom he met late on the Saturday afternoon on the Corrymuckloch road. Now that the fishing was over, Fergus wearied, and the weather was getting cold for Sheila, and so they kept tryst but seldom at the Girron Brig. The boy used to haunt the road below Dalmore, hoping for a sight of his uncle; but the familiar sight of graceful Mora and her stalwart rider was not often seen now about Amulree.

Puddin' was riding, but drew rein straight before Fergus, grinning broadly.

'So we're gaun' to Perth schule, you an' me, on Monday,' he said in the broad Scotch which sometimes vexed his father, who yearned after gentility.

'It's a lie,' said Fergus, with the plain, unvarnished candour of one boy to another.

'No, it's no'. You ask yer mither. It's the vera same

lodgin's. It's a' settled,' said Puddin', grinning still. 'They might ha'e asked us whether or no' first.'

'I don't believe a word of it, Puddin' McBean; and if it is true, I won't go,' said Fergus serenely, and went away whistling, with his hands in his pockets, thinking the joke was one of Puddin's feeblest attempts. For they had been such bad friends at Achnafauld that the idea of occupying the same lodgings seemed the height of absurdity. Fergus passed on to the brig, stood by the parapet for a few minutes watching the steady flow of the burn, growing big with the first of the 'spates,' and then, without thinking very much what he was doing, crossed over, and began to ascend the hill to Dalmore. I believe Dalmore was never a moment out of the laddie's heart. He thought of it in his waking hours, and dreamed of it when he slept. He loved that place above anything in the world. He went on and on. Colin met him at the head of the approach with a joyous bark, and bounded before him into the house. Hearing the unusual noise, Tory took up the chorus in the drawing-room, and Sheila came running down to see what the commotion was.

'Oh, Fergus, Fergus! I am so glad to see you!' she cried, her face all aglow with delight. 'Oh, come in, and I'll tell papa. How nice it is to see you, Fergus! Come away in.'

She clasped her two hands through his arm, and looked up into his face with perfect adoration in her eyes. Dear bairns, how they loved each other! They knew nothing of jealousy, and hate, and dissension. Oh that they could remain ignorant of them for ever!

'It seems so long since I saw you, Fergus. Why don't you come up? When I see Colin trotting over to Shonnen, I wish he could speak and tell you to come.'

'*You* never come down to the brig, though,' said Fergus reproachfully.

'Aunt Ailsa was up, Fergus, and she told Anne Ross not to let me out when there was any wet on the grass, so I have just to play cattie and doggie with Tory in the drawing-room.'

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'I should think so. Is Uncle Graham in?'

'Yes; it will soon be tea-time. Papa always has tea with me, and then I have dinner with him. And is it true you are going away to school on Monday?'

'I never heard of it till this very day. Puddin' M'Bean told me. I met him at the brig just now. He says I'm to live in his lodgings,' said Fergus laughingly. 'Hulloa, Tory! He's far bigger, Sheila, and far too fat. A lazy rascal, isn't he?'

'Oh no. Here's papa. Isn't it nice, papa? Fergus has come, and we'll have tea together,' said Sheila, running to meet Macdonald, and taking him by the hand.

Fergus ran to meet his uncle, too, and was struck by his aged appearance and by the melancholy expression on his face.

'Well, Fergus, lad, glad to see you. I was saying to Sheila to-day you'd be up to say good-bye. So Puddin' and you have buried past grievances, and are going to keep each other company in Perth? A very sensible arrangement. You can have a set-to when the lessons weary you.'

'Uncle Graham,' cried Fergus hotly, 'I never heard a thing about it. I *can't* be going, or I would have known.'

But even as he spoke he remembered noticing a kind of extra work going on at Shonnen, and a great turning out and mending of clothes.

'May be not, boy. It was the factor who told me it was all arranged; but surely your mother would have told you.'

The boy's face flushed, and he dashed away a bitter tear which started in his eye. Oh, but Ellen Macleod was making a grievous and terrible mistake. She was treating the boy as if he were a machine, a thing without feeling or desire, which she could move about at will. And yet she expected filial duty, filial affection, and respect in return.

She frequently reminded Fergus of the scriptural injunction to children concerning their duty to their parents, but forgot

to take to her own soul, for her guiding, the corresponding injunction to parents.

From the beginning her training of the boy was a mistake. She had the making or marring of a fine character in her hands.

Let us pray it may not be completely and irretrievably marred.



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CHAPTER XII.

FACTOR AND LAIRD.

Like our shadows, our wishes lengthen as our sun declines.

YOUNG.

HAVE come up to see what I'm to say to these folks to-morrow, sir,' said Angus M'Bean to the Laird in the library at Dalmore. It was the 5th of December, and the snow lay two feet deep on the ground, and immense drifts stretched from side to side of exposed roads, which were level with the dry stone dykes. The 6th of December was the rent-day on Findowie and Dalmore. Angus M'Bean had quite settled in his mind what he was to say to the malcontents, but of course it behoved him to make the form of consulting the Laird. Macdonald had but a languid interest in these affairs. He was indeed a changed man, like one whose interest in life was dead. It lay buried with his love in the old graveyard at Shian.

'Oh, ay, some repairs they wanted. What are they?' asked Macdonald, rousing himself up when the factor spoke. He was sitting, as he would sit for hours, by the fire, with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

'Donald Macalpine wants a new smiddy, no less. He complains of the chimney—the smoke won't go up. I bade him knock a brick out of the side. He says it's dark, and I told him to knock some more out of the wall opposite the door.'

'A new smiddy!' said the Laird, with a grim smile. 'Less will have to serve Donald, I doubt, in these hard times. Could we not repair the place for him?'

'No, it would be a sinful waste of money. The smiddy is as good as ever it was. You can go along and see it for yourself. I'll tell you what I think. Donald McGlashan has made such a bonnie penny in the smiddy that he's not caring about it now. Four pound ten for the croft and the smiddy is far too little, Laird, according as they are paying now. The rents are rising instead of falling up by Killin and Rannoch.'

'So I'm told. Well, you can say to Donald if he isn't pleased he can quit,' said the Laird. 'What next?'

'Ewan M'Fadyen's byre. Is he to get a new roof on it? There's only a bit hole at the east end where the snow can blow through, because he was too lazy to thaik it in the back end. As I said to him, "Is the Laird to pay money out of his pocket for your idle habits?" He maun just divot it until next year,' said the factor, without giving the Laird time to put in a word. 'He has a fine crop of oats this year, and his hay was about the best; then he has five pounds from the kirk, an' yet he's aye seeking. We'll let him girn. Jenny Menzies has got two bairns, her brother's weans from Glasgow, and wants her rent down a pound for their keep. What do you think of that for Jenny, Laird?'

'Jenny's gleg,' said the Laird, with an absent smile. 'I heard of the bairns. The lad is a trifle queer, and not strong. No doubt she'll have her own to do with the bairns. Take the pound off. What next?'

'Sir, I don't think it would be right to take it off Jenny Menzies' rent. It's very moderate, and she makes a heap by her spinning. The bairns will be more a help than a hinder, and if we favour her the rest will have cause to grumble.'

'Take the pound off,' repeated the Laird quietly. 'What's next?'

'Rob Macnaughton is for a roof on Rory Macalpine's old house for him to set up another loom in. That shows how the wind blows. They count nothing on the land, Laird, and

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use your houses for their own ends. If stocking-weaving pays so well, let them build houses for themselves, say I.'

'Certainly, certainly,' said the Laird quickly. 'I hope that's all, M'Bean. These grumblings weary me. It is only of late they seem to have arisen. What is their cause?'

'Just what I've often said, sir: the folk have gotten into idle, fashioneless ways, and they'd take the land for nothing and not be content. It would be far less bother and better pay among big farms. At the rent-time, Laird, I could wish the wind would rise and blaw the Fauld to the bottom o' Loch Fraochie. It's all toil and little thanks for them. Findowie's not half the trouble.'

'Well, well, you're among the grumblers, too, Angus,' said the Laird. 'But your job pays you very well. Any back rents to-morrow?'

'Ay, that's another thing. What am I to say to James Stewart at Turrich? He's nine pounds back, and three for this tack makes twelve. I don't expect he'll pay the half of it.'

'Turrich! Oh, that's the man with the sickly wife and ten bairns. Well, money can't be very plentiful with him, Angus.'

'Far too many of them, sir. If he'd set them off to service, there would be fewer mouths to feed. And he's wanting more land, too. He says if he had Little Turrich croft and another horse, he could make it pay. But it's all nonsense. He wants Little Turrich for Rob, the ne'er-do-weel son of his that wants to marry Mrs. M'Bean's bit servant lass. A bonnie pair they'd make, an' a bonnie bungle o' Little Turrich, as I told them. But we'll see what old Jamie brings the morn. I think that's a', Laird.'

'An' plenty; too much, Angus. How's the lad getting on at the school?'

'Very well, but he can't keep up with Mr. Fergus, as is hardly to be expected,' said the factor smoothly.

'Then he can't be doing much, for my nephew is no scholar. But do they 'gree?' asked the Laird dryly.

'I never hear anything about it if they don't,' said the factor, with a laugh. 'Laddies are aye bickering. Is little Miss Murray very well?'

'Miss Macdonald is,' returned the Laird, with emphasis, 'She is Miss Macdonald now, M'Bean, you can tell the folk.'

Angus M'Bean could only nod his head in silent acknowledgment of the Laird's speech. But he made a note of it for future consideration, and for communication to Ellen Macleod. It would be a fine tit-bit for her. Angus M'Bean began to wonder if he had done wisely in paying so much attention at Shonnen. If necessary, he could easily shy off; in the meantime, he would wait and see.

'I hope the lady who has come to look after Miss Macdonald's education is giving satisfaction?' he said inquiringly.

'Oh yes; the child is fond of her, and it keeps her from wearying.'

'Mrs. M'Bean would be pleased to see Miss Macdonald and her governess at Auchloy. It would be a nice walk on a fine day,' said the factor, as he rose to go.

'They confine themselves to Dalmore and to the post road, I think; but I'll tell 'hem. The whisky is on the table, Angus; help yourself.'

'Thank you, sir; your very good health, and Miss Macdonald's, and prosperity to Dalmore,' said the factor as he tossed off his glass.

'Thank you. Good-night. Look up after the business is done,' said the Laird.

'I'll be sure to do that. I wish it was over,' said the factor, and he was perfectly sincere in what he said. Rent-day was never a very pleasant one for Angus M'Bean, for he was generally obliged to listen to some very plain statements of fact concerning himself. Left alone, Macdonald returned to his solitary musing, and sat long by the fire, indeed until it became smouldering ashes in the grate, brooding over his lost happiness, and making the weight of his sorrow a thousand times heavier. He had no one to rouse him out of himself. Sheila was but a child, and did not fully understand why the shadow should dwell so continuously on her father's brow. Her bounding step, sweet smile, and bright, bairnly ways never failed to rouse him at times; but now that the governess had come to Dalmore, the two were a little separated. Lady Ailsa

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had suggested, and indeed insisted that if Sheila were to remain at Dalmore, a young lady who could be governess and companion to the solitary child must be engaged. Macdonald did not demur, and the minister's daughter from Logie Murray came to Dalmore. She was a bright, happy creature, to whom Sheila took kindly at once. So the winter promised well for the bairn; but with the short dreary days and long solitary evenings, when the wintry winds howled fiercely round on the exposed headland on which Dalmore stood, the shadows seemed to fall yet more darkly down upon Macdonald's heart.

Angus McBean, the factor, had an office in his house at Auchloy, where the estate business was transacted and the rents received. Hitherto the rents had been punctually paid, and that without much grumbling, though bit by bit the privileges were being wrested from the cottars in Achnafauld. It was done very gradually, little by little, but it was the thin edge of the wedge which Angus McBean meant to drive home. First, the fishing on the loch had been preserved; a small thing in itself, and not of much importance, seeing the cottars did not greatly patronize the sport, but it served as a straw to show how the wind blew. Then a fence would be removed which would take off a bit of the common pasture and enclose it with the factor's land; and then it became an impossibility to get any repairs at the hands of the Laird. They paid well for their crofts,—about double in proportion per acre to what Angus McBean paid for Auchloy,—and it might have been thought it was only a fair thing for the Laird to uphold the buildings in the clachan. Certainly it had been the custom for years for the cottars to keep up their meagre steadings, for which purpose they were welcome to obtain wood free of charge from the Laird's saw-mill on the Quaich. But the mill was at the very head of the glen, a very sore road, and the few horses in the Fauld had enough to do on the land without carting wood.

So the steadings, in spite of thatching and patching, were falling into disreputable disrepair.

Angus McBean, as we have seen, went through the form of consulting the Laird, whose remarks he twisted and turned into meanings to suit his own ends.

About twelve o'clock next day there was a gathering in the smiddy to discuss matters before the men should proceed to the factor's office. There would be about a dozen men, conspicuous among them Ewan the precentor, dressed in a rusty black coat, and big Sandy Maclean, in close conference with Donald Macalpine the smith, who was holding forth at a great rate about the condition of the smiddy.

The bottle was passing freely, and already Ewan M'Fadyen was getting conspicuously talkative and cheery.

'God bless my soul, lads!' he said; 'wha's Angus M'Bean that we should feel our equilibrium vibrate in his presence? If he doesn't think fit to accept the honorarium we offer, let him go and hide his diminished head in the loch.'

'That wad suit you, Ewan: ye're unco drouthy this mornin',' said Rob Macnaughton the stocking-weaver, dryly. He was a long, gaunt, strange-looking man, with a shaggy black beard, and a gleaming, restless black eye. He did not often appear in any of the smiddy conclaves; but, as he had a grievance and a request also to lay before the factor when he paid his rent, he had stepped over to see what was going on.

'Listen to the immortal breathings of the Bard of Achnaufauld,' said Ewan, in his most grandiloquent style.

When Ewan had been imbibing even moderately, his eloquence and verbosity became even yet more remarkable than usual.

'Haud yer blethers, Ewan, an' hear what's gaun on,' said Donald Macalpine hastily. 'We're discussin' what's to be done if none of us gets any satisfaction from the Laird. Look at the smiddy, lads, and say what ye think of its condition. There's that muckle draught in't that it wad take a' the peat mosses in the Glen to keep the furnace gaun. I'm sure it's but reasonable to ask something done.'

'The powers that be will doubtless have another version of the story,' said Ewan M'Fadyen. 'If they won't repair the east end of my byre, we'll need to gie Meg quarters in the kitchen. Well, Janet Menzies, my woman, what for should ye enter into the solemn assemblage of the elders?' he added, as

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the doorway was darkened by a little wizened woman in a shortgown and 'soo-backit' mutch.

'It's after twel'; are ye no' gaun west the' glen?' she asked, in a shrill voice. 'Angus M'Bean 'll be gaspin' for his siller. His haund's like a muckle wame, aye gantlin'.'

'Hae ye gotten your pickle to help the hole, Jenny?' asked Sandy Maclean slyly. For answer Jenny turned out the old stocking-foot she held in her hand, and showed three very dirty pound notes.

'That's every penny he gets frae me,' she said shrilly. 'It was Laird Macdonald's wyte that Jock Menzies had to leave the Fauld, and me wi' the land to manage.'

'But it wasna the Laird's wyte that Jock married a wife, Janet,' said Sandy, who, in his big, slow, lumbering fashion, enjoyed a joke.

'No; but if Jock had bidden in the Fauld there wad hae neither been wife nor weans, an' I'd tell Laird Macdonald that gin I saw him.'

There was something almost uncanny in the old creature's gesture and look as she sharply replied to Sandy's mild chaffing. She was supposed not to be quite right, and most folk pitied the poor bairns who had been sent to her care. Jock, her brother, had been a queer callant also, and such an inveterate poacher, that the glen had got too hot for him. Some of the gentlemen at the lodge in the shooting season had got him a place in Glasgow, in which city he took to himself a wife. But he had never done much good there, and his drinking habits shortened his days. His wife died before him, and the orphans were left in Jenny's care. This woman was a thorn in the flesh of Angus M'Bean. It is not too much to say that a mortal enmity existed between them. The factor feared her wild temper and her unbridled tongue. When she was in a passion she had a knack of recalling certain unpleasant incidents connected with his youth, which he preferred to forget. He was just watching, eager for a chance to get her evicted from the Fauld, but as yet had been unable to find any excuse.

That was a busy morning at Auchloy. Peter Crerar had lately been employed occasionally to help the factor with his

books, and of course was in attendance on the rent-day. Very early poor Jamie Stewart came over from Turrich, anxious to hear the Laird's decision about Little Turrich. It was a matter of moment to him to keep his eldest son at home, but the lad was anxious to marry, and it was impossible to divide the croft. He had seven pounds in his pocket, which he presented to Angus M'Bean with a trembling hand.

'Five pounds short, Jamie, that means a stink or two ewes for the Laird,' said Angus pleasantly. 'Ye might just have had the beastie sold; it would have saved trouble.'

'I canna sell a beastie the noo, Mr. M'Bean; the Laird maun just wait,' said Jamie quietly. 'What said he about Little Turrich?'

'Do ye think the Laird's a fool, Jamie Stewart? If ye canna pay for five acres, how could ye pay for seven? Give him his receipt for seven pounds, Peter Crerar. There's somebody else waiting at the door.'

'But did ye explain aboot the horse and what Bob wantit?' asked Jamie Stewart.

'The Laird has mair to think of than your affairs, Jamie Stewart. They would gie him but little satisfaction. Awa' back to Turrich, and I'll be owre some day to wale a beastie for the rent.'

A shadow came upon the old man's face, but he was of a meek disposition, and retired without a word. As he went out, Janet Menzies pushed herself into the room, and, with a curious leer at Angus M'Bean, drew out her three pound-notes.

'There ye are, my man; there's yer siller, an' muckle guid may it dae ye,' she said, in her shrill voice, which was hateful to Angus M'Bean.

'Three pounds, Janet? where's the other one? The Laird has not let down your rent, that I'm aware of.'

'Ye'll get nae mair frae me. Did ye tell him that I had gotten Jock's bairns to keep?'

'I did; but we can't keep them for you, so out wi' your other pound, my woman, without more ado.'

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I want to ken is, what you pay for Auchloy, Angus M'Bean, and hoo many bittocks ye are thieviu' frae the Fauld?'

Angus M'Bean swore at the woman, and she smiled a quiet smile to herself; nothing pleased her better than to see the factor angered.

'My woman, ye'll pay for yer impertinence. D'ye ken wha ye're speakin' to? The Laird shall ken o'd, an' if ye bide anither year in the Fauld, I'm mistaken. Gie the auld deil her receipt, Peter, an' let her take her ill tongue outside. Come in, Ewan M'Fadyen. I see ye keekin' through the keyhole wi' yer skelly e'e. Come in an' pit doon yer bawbees. No, if ye want yer byre to keep out the snaw ye maun divot it, the Laird says. Ye needna preach; I haena time to listen to yer maunderin's. Ye're owre weel aff, an' dinna ken o' it.'

With such grim pleasantries the factor received and dismissed the tenants. Every request was refused, every grievance scouted and laughed at.

And he laid it all at the Laird's door, putting words in his mouth he had never uttered.

So the seeds of disunion were sown, and Achnafauld was set against Dalmore.





CHAPTER XIII.

FORESHADOWINGS.

Man's inhumanity to man
Makes countless thousands mourn.

BURNS.



O you know where Malcolm is, Katie?' 'Malcolm! Oh, Mr. Fergus, is it you? He is at the potatoes. Shall I run and tell him you want him?' asked Kate Menzies, blushing all over at the unexpected sight of Fergus Macleod in the doorway, when her plump round arms were bare to the elbow, preparatory to beginning the weekly baking.

'That's the Shonnen lad's voice. What for should he no' cross my door-stane. Has his lare made him ower prood to sit doon by a Fauld i. ggle?' cried a shrill, uncanny voice from the depths of a big chair by the hearthside.

Jenny Menzies had lost the power of arm and limb through rheumatics, but her tongue was just as ready, and her temper as fiery as ever. Although she was so helpless, and so utterly dependent on her niece, she was not in the least grateful for any service rendered by the girl's willing hands. When too angry to speak, she would throw whatever came handiest at her—peats oftener than anything, for her chair stood close by the peat bin.

'Eh, is that you, Jenny?' cried Fergus, with a laugh. 'I

thought you might be sleeping. How is the world using you, eh?’

As he spoke, the big handsome lad stalked into the little kitchen and took the old woman’s hand in a kindly grip, which pleased her well, though it hurt her poor swollen joints not a little.

‘Eh, callant, ye hae grown in spite o’ yer lare an’ yer toon’s meat. Ech, what a year or twa can dae for brats o’ bairns.’

It was true, a few years had indeed wrought wondrous changes in the young folk who make the chief interest of this history. We left Katie Menzies a bairn, and we find her, when we cross the bridge of these few years, a comely, womanly girl of fifteen. She had a woman’s work to do, and a woman’s care and forethought to exercise, which had doubtless given her a maturity of appearance and manner she might not otherwise have attained so early. She was a sweet-looking young maiden, with a clear, healthy-hued face, a bright, speaking blue eye, and a happy smile. Her dress, a striped skirt and a light calico shortgown, with a white handkerchief folded round her sweet throat and crossed on her bosom, was peculiarly and modestly becoming. It was no wonder they called Katie Menzies the bonniest lass in Achnafauld. As for Fergus Macleod, at sixteen he had almost attained a man’s height, though his loose figure had yet to fill up and make breadth proportionate to the length. His face was not so ruddy as it had been when he lived constantly in the open air, but its hue was perfectly healthy, and his clear grey eyes bright and undimmed as of yore.

‘Sit down upon a seat, Fergus Macleod, if ye be the same laddie ye aye were,’ said Jenny Menzies brusquely. ‘Sit down, I say, and gie’s the news. I ken naething. My limmers o’ bairns never tell a thing, and now that I’m laid aside the neebor folk think I’m deid.’

Katie turned to her baking with a twinkle in her happy eye, which Fergus caught and smiled too. He looked at Katie with great interest. How bonnie and sweet she was! He wondered he had not thought of it before.

‘So ye are gaun awa’ to the college, I hear,’ pursued Jenny. ‘What are they to mak’ o’ ye?’

‘I don’t know. I am going to the college just now to please

my mother. And I'll have to do something for my living,' said Fergus, with a slight cloud on his brow, for the sore subject was a sore subject still.

'An' what's to come o' Dalmore, eh? The auld Laird's sair failed, they say; never oot the hoose.'

'So I hear. I have not seen my uncle for a long time,' said Fergus hastily. 'I can't sit a long time, Jenny, for I've to go round the Fauld, and I want a talk with Malcolm.'

'An' when are ye gaun away?'

'On Monday.'

'An' when did ye come?'

'Yesterday.'

'They dinna gie ye muckle rest for the soles o' yer feet. Is the factor's son gaun wi' ye?'

'He is going to college, but his classes will be different. We'll not see much of each other.'

'He's idled about a' the simmer, an' played a heap o' mischief in the Fauld. Malcolm fair hates him. Oor Malky's maybe no' a' there, but he has ta'en the size o' Puddin' M'Bean,' said the old woman, with a kind of grim delight. 'D'ye ken wha's Laird o' Dalmore now, Master Fergus?'

'No,' said Fergus, looking slightly surprised.

'Him up at Auchloy. Eh, lad, it's time ye were at hame to look efter what should be yer ain. If ye are ower lang, there'll no' be muckle to divide. An' there's a young ane comin' up that'll be waur nor the auld ane. If ye are a true Macdonald, lad, ye'll see to it that the factorship disna pass frae father to son. We ken a' about it here. Gang to Donald M'Glashan, or Rob Macnaughton, or Dugald M'Tavish. They'll a' gie ye the same story.'

'It is surely not so bad as that, Jenny,' said Fergus, trying to speak cheerfully, as he rose to his feet. 'I can't believe that my uncle is not able to manage his own affairs. Good-day to you. Good-day. Katie, come out, will you, and let me see where Malcolm is?'

Katie wiped her hands and followed him out to the door.

'Katie,' said Fergus soberly, 'I've heard a great deal about

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Angus McBean's way of going on. Is it really true that he oppresses the folk in the Fauld?'

Tears started in Katie's eyes. 'Ay, it's quite true, Master Fergus. I wondered, indeed, that auntie didna say more. He's been very hard on us. He seems to hate us, and wants us out of the place. Mr. Fergus, I'm perfectly feared whiles at Malcolm. Oh, try and speak to him. You know he is a queer laddie, and when he gets into his awfu' passions, if he were to see the factor or Angus, he might kill them. I whiles wish we had bidden in Glasca, though I like the Fauld. It's grand to live in sic a bonnie place, among sic kind neebors.'

'I'll try what I can do, Katie,' said Fergus, with deeply clouding brow, for he felt himself very helpless. He was growing up, and understood many things which had puzzled him in boyhood. He loved the old folk in the Fauld, for they had known him since he was a bairn.

'Have ye seen Miss Sheila this time, Mr. Fergus?' asked Katie. 'She is to go away to the boarding-school soon, she says.'

'No, I have not seen her. Does she come often to the Fauld?'

'Oh yes; twice or thrice a week. She is so kind to auntie. If it werena for what she brings, Mr. Fergus, we couldna live. We had to put away the sheep and the cow too, for we had no grass.'

'What's become of the hill. Is the pasture not as good as it once was?'

'Ay, but we daurna put a beast on it. Oh, it's hard times, Mr. Fergus. But there's auntie cryin'. Speak to Malky, will ye, an' bid him be more patient. I whiles think that he angers Mr. McBean more than he need.'

'I'll try, Katie; don't be vexed,' said Fergus, and shook her by the hand, for they had been bairns together at the Fauld School, and nobody could help liking Katie.

He hesitated just a moment; desire drew him to the smith's shop, but he knew he would get the information he wanted without ado from Rob Macnaughton, the stocking-weaver. So he ran across the road and lifted the sneck of

Rob's door. All the other doors in the Fauld stood open summer and winter in the daytime, but Rob's was aye shut. The loom seemed to be silent, and when he pushed open the kitchen door, there was Rob, with his little table before the fire, taking his solitary tea. He was not in any way changed, unless the big, gaunt, shuffling figure seemed to have grown more loose and thin-looking; but there was not a grey hair in his head, nor any sign of approaching age on his grim, stern face.

'It's you,' he said, fixing his keen eye on Fergus, but without any sign of recognition. 'If ye be comin' in, shut the door.'

'Well, Rob, how are you? Well enough, I see. I'm not forgetting my old friends. I have only been at Shonnen for two days, and here I am.'

'So I see; ye've grown. Ye are a man now, Fergus Macleod. Sit down if ye are to bide a bit.'

'Yes. I'm going to bide a bit. I've come to you seeking authentic information,' he said, in his quick, impetuous fashion. 'Rob, is it true that times are getting hard for the Fauld folk. Tell me all about it.'

A slow, bitter smile came upon Rob Macnaughton's grim face. He took up his saucer and drank all his tea, and then lifted the table back to the wall.

'I've gi'en up parritch,' he said laconically; 'when ye've to buy milk, tea's cheaper, and it takes less time to make. So ye've been hearing some rumblings o' the thunder that sometimes shakes the clachan?'

'I've been at Jenny Menzies's. Katie says they're positively ill off. Rob, did my uncle give orders that their beasts were not to go on the hill?'

'There's no hill now, lad. It's fenced in as the lands of Auchloy. There's a new laird. But, as ye've been away, ye've maybe not heard of the change.'

'It's abominable, perfectly abominable!' cried the lad hotly. 'If you knew my uncle as I know him, Rob, you would be perfectly mad at Angus M'Bean. My uncle is so kind, a kinder man never breathed, only, of course, he is just If he

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knew the true state of affairs, he would set them right instantly. I'll go to him myself and tell him how you are oppressed.'

'I misdoubt not your word, Fergus, for I remember Laird Macdonald as a just man, though not generous. It is only justice we want. Justice would enable us to live. It has come to this, Fergus Macleod, that the spoiler and the oppressors have turned the hearts of the people to gall within them, and that they can stand it no more. The day is coming, nay, it is drawing very near, when the snell winds shall whistle through the rent roofs of Achnafauld, and where there has been the hum of peace and plenty, with the music of bairns' voices, there shall be but the cryin' o' the burn an' the songhin' o' the birks, and the homes where peace and neighbourly kindness dwelt shall become the haunt of the cattle and the deer.

'Some day this house, Fergus Macleod, where my forebears dwelt long before there was a Macdonald set foot upon the soil, will be a rent ruin, a cattle-pen, maybe, for the stock of the Laird of Auchloy. But let him beware. Let him not think he stands firm. For the tears and the curses of the people he hath so grievously oppressed shall ascend to heaven, and hath not the Lord, whom mayhap we have forgotten in our prosperity, said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay"?''

The poet's eye shone with the peculiar fire which Fergus remembered used to awe him in boyhood, when Rob would forget his presence, and half chant, half recite his weird Gaelic ballads and the superstitious legends in which he delighted.

'You are poetical, but not practical, Rob,' said the lad quietly. 'Have the Fauld folk thought of anything to do in self-defence? I wish you'd tell me everything. I may be able to do something to help you.'

Rob laid the points of his fingers together in a peculiar way, and looked over them at the lad with a touch of compassion.

'You? Lad, ye are too open and guileless to fight the devil. My advice to you is, steer clear of Angus M'Bean. The only thing that would save the Fauld would be if the Laird were to die now, and leave the place to you. It is yours by right. She is a sweet bairn, they say, that comes down from Dalmore;

but she is not of your blood. The place is yours by right, but it never will be yours, Fergus Macleod, as long as that ill man bides in the glen.'

'If I had the power I'd make short work of him,' said Fergus, and he clenched his hands; for the interests of his heart—nay, of his life—were bound up in the place and the people among whom his boyhood had been spent. No mortal knew what it had been for the lad to dwell away from these hills and glens, and to give his attention to books. He had gained more sense now, however; and, knowing that education and knowledge are powers which have no equal, he had ceased to kick over the traces, and was quiet in scholastic harness. But meanwhile, oh, what things were happening in the glen!

'Do you mind Jamie Stewart, that was in Turrich, Fergus?'

'Yes, fine.'

'Well, in the spring-time there—ye ken what the March blasts are up Glenquaich—he was put out of Turrich—evicted, I think, is the new-fangled word they used. He was back in his rent about ten pounds, I think; but there was stuff and beasts to pay it over and above. And the wife had to be carried out, bed and all, and laid down at the dyke-side above the drift. What think ye o' that, Fergus Macleod?'

Tears—tears of anger and burning indignation—stood in the boy's honest eyes.

'And what became of them, Rob?'

'The Laird of Garrows gave them a house and a croft, and there they are biding in the meantime till things are settled. But I would lay this thing before you, Fergus Macleod, for ye are a just, fair-minded lad, wi' mair nor a man's sense. Two hundred years ago—ay, and more—the Stewarts abode in Turrich, and farmed their own lands. At the '45 Turrich went out to fight wi' Charlie, and died on Culloden, and then the place was confiscated, they called it, but we are honest folk, and speak in an honest tongue. So Macdonald that was in Dalmore, a Royalist, though he bore one of the best Highland names, seized upon Turrich an' a' the lands up the glen. An' syne, when the blast blew past, and Turrich's wife an' bairns came back to the glen, they found their home stolen from them,

and that they had no habitation on the face of the earth. But for the love they bore to the place of their birth, they took it upon Macdonald's terms, and became tillers of their own soil once more, but paying tithes in money and kind for the lease.'

'Is all that true, Rob?'

'True? Ay, and that's but one case. Not that we're grumbling. We are willing to pay a fair rent if we can but make a living,' said Rob, growing more practical. 'At one time that was easy, for the Laird meddled not with us. I know not, Fergus, why Angus M'Bean should have sic an ill will at the place and the folk among whom he was born. His father was a fine man; but a good man may have an ill son. There are folk, Fergus, who make good servants, but canna rule. It sweeps them off their feet. Auchloy is one. But he has a long account to settle wi' the Almighty at the last day. I'd rather be Jamie Stewart, landless and friendless, than Angus M'Bean of Auchloy.'

Fergus Macleod hid his face in his hands. These things weighed upon his heart.





CHAPTER XIV.

MALCOLM.

A rude, wild soul,
To whom the whispering breeze,
The silent hills, the rushing tide,
Spoke with strange voices.

DOES my uncle never come to the Fauld now, Rob?' Fergus asked at length.

'No. They say he's sore spent, and cannot live long. He lost his spirit, lad, when his lady died.'

'And what do you think will be the end of it all?' said the boy, with a burst of wistful earnestness very touching to behold.

'The end will be as I said. The four winds of heaven will sweep through the Fauld, and will not be heard by the ears of living mortal in the place,' said Rob. 'Ye mind of Peter Crerar, the schoolmaster, that was clerk, too, to the factor?'

'How could I have forgotten Peter, Rob, when I was at his school for six months?'

'Well, him and his brother David and his uncle, lang John McFadyen that was in Easter Lynmore, went away in the spring across the seas to Upper Canada; and what think ye was their errand, lad?'

Fergus shook his head, his eyes fixed on Rob with the most intense interest.

'It was to see what manner of country it is: to view the land, as the Israelites viewed the land of Canaan; and no later gone than yesterday letters came to the Fauld, and it's a grand report. So there'll be a heap of spinning and weaving in the Fauld this winter, Fergus Macleod.'

'What for?'

'To prepare against the day when the folk shall rise in a body and go forth from their own land to a land they know not and have never seen. But it couldna well be harder till them than this has been.'

'You don't mean to say, Rob Macnaughton, that they're going to emigrate?'

'Yes; after due consideration, that is what decision we have arrived at, and it is a wise one. I shall not myself leave Achnafauld, because I can aye get bite and sup, and I have some siller laid by. But for the young men and the fathers of families it is a wise plan, Fergus, that they should leave before they are cleared out, as they certainly will be, by the corbie at Auchloy, if they bide muckle langer in the place.'

'Does my uncle know of this?'

'I know not, Fergus. Auchloy himself has an inkling of it.'

'And who are going, Rob? Tell me quick. Oh, I can hardly believe it!'

'There's all the Stewarts, and the Crerars, and Ewan M'Fadyen. Of Donald Macalpine I'm not sure, for his business is good, and cannot be meddled with by Angus M'Bean. And there's big Sandy Maclean an' a' his folks, and wee Sandy Maclean down by at Wester Coila, an' a heap more whose names I canna mind.'

'Are they all from Dalmore folk, Rob? Are there no discontents among Shian or Garrows cottars?'

'Not that I've heard of. Cameron of Garrows and Campbell of Shian deal straight with their own people, and there is not the lying, evil tongue of Angus M'Bean to come between. Fergus Macleod, if ever you come to your own, or have name and lands in your hand, take warning by what has happened here among the folk ye have kent all your days. Let no man come between you and your folk, and then there will be

justice done. Are ye for off? I mis-doubt, laddie, I have laid a heavy sorrow on your young heart, but bear it lightly, as it is not of your own doing. If ye come in by another day, I'll let ye hear my lilt about the desolation of the Fauld. It has been wrung from me by the vexations of the folk. They think me thrawn, and say my heart is like the nether millstane, but they dinna ken that the strong currents rin wi' nae muckle din, and that I'm wae, wae for Achnafauld, an' the leal hearts that have kent no other hame.'

'Rob,' said Fergus, turning back at the door, 'do you ever see or speak with Malcolm Menzies? Katie says she is anxious about him.'

'She may be; the lad has a fine spirit that's easy fretted. I've whiles a dwam about him mysel'. There's a mortal hatred between Angus M'Bean and him.'

'Are the Menzies not among the intending emigrants?'

Rob shook his head.

'Jenny Menzies couldna sail the seas with her stiff joints now, and the bairns maun bide behind wi' her. They say Malcolm Menzies is daft, Fergus; but dinna you believe it. He has the music of the winds an' of the runnin' waters in his soul. The puir chield is a poet, an' disna ken what a' the clangour an' the jumble means. He'll find his weird yet, Fergus, an' there will be peace of mind when the music that's in him finds its voice, Fergus. He'll Garaw nae mair wi' Angus M'Bean, and vex his sister's soul, for he'll hae that within him that'll make him at peace with all men.'

'Does he come in by to you, Rob?'

'Whiles, an' sits an' greets an' greets as if he were a lass bairn instead of a muckle haffin wi' the strength o' twa men. Then I pit the bolt in the door, an' gie him my rhymes an' sangs or the lad's fair beside himsel' wi' delight. Daft! na, there's no' muckle daftness about Malcolm Menzies. He'll maybe surprise us a' some day.'

'I'll go, then, Rob, and look out for Malcolm. I'd like well to see him before I go to the college.'

'Does the thought of the gown an' the pulpit no' set up your birse now as it did, Fergus?'

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'I'll never be a minister, Rob, though I should cast peats for my living. But I have more sense than that, and I know that without learning a man can do but little in the world. My mother knows my mind is made up, but she is anxious for me to take my degree in arts at Edinburgh.'

'Ye are a sensible lad, but ye promised weel as a bairn,' said Rob, looking into the fine, open, honest countenance of the boy with a strange, softened glance. 'Gin ye were but Laird o' Findowie an' Dalmore, there would be less talk about the ferlies across the sea. Guid e'en, Fergus, an' may every blessing guide ye.'

Fergus nodded and strode off, while Rob put his bolt in the door and went back to his loom. Fergus Macleod wondered when he heard folk speak of Rob Macnaughton as a dull, sour, morose being, with whom it was impossible to converse. Children's hands could open the locked door of Rob's heart, and push it back on its rusty hinges, and he whom the child can love is never bad.

Fergus ran over the stepping-stones, never looking back, though he heard the smith's jolly voice calling him. He knew that, if they inveigled him in, Donald and Mary between them would keep him an hour at the fireside. Behind Janet Menzies's cottage he saw Malcolm working alone in the potato drills, though it was so dark he could not possibly see to do his work well. Fergus gave a loud, shrill whistle, and stood up on a little hillock at the burn-side, so that Malcolm might see him. The tall, loosely-hung figure gave a start and stood up, looking round to see where the whistle came from. Catching sight of Fergus, Malcolm put down his graip and creel, and came slowly up the drill. He was an odd figure in his rough homespun, his trouser legs warped round with straw ropes to keep out the mud, and his big, sprawling feet encased in heavy clogs. The remains of a red Tam o' Shanter hung on to a tuft of hair on his crown, leaving the big forehead bare. His large melancholy eyes had a somewhat wandering look in them, and there was a weak look about the mouth. He was not a robust lad, but when it pleased him, or when he was roused into a passion, he could exhibit a terrible strength. His appearance was singular

in the extreme. It was, indeed, difficult to believe that he was bonnie Katie's brother; but he was very dear to Katie, and she was the apple of Malcolm's eye. His love for her was indeed more like the worship of a lover than the sober affection of a brother. He was pitied in the Fauld, but not much taken notice of except by Rob Macnaughton, who had found the key to that half-wild, sensitive, passionate nature.

A gleam of pleased recognition came in his face when he came near to Fergus Macleod, for whom he had a strong regard. Fergus had never laughed at or teased the poor, shy, queer lad, whom everybody else treated as a half-wit, and Malcolm Menzies was capable of intense gratitude.

'Halloa, Malky, what a man you've grown,' cried Fergus cheerily. 'I'm sure you can't see to lift potatoes now. Come on up the road a bit with me; I want to speak to you, and I haven't time to wait.'

'When did ye come back?' asked Malcolm, with a slow smile of pleasure on his sunburned face.

'Why, yesterday, and I'm going away on Monday. I've been in seeing Aunt Jenny and Katie. How are you getting on, Malky?'

'Oh, fine,' cried Malcolm, and dropped his eyes down on the ground. He walked usually thus, in a kind of shuffling gait, with his hands in his pockets. Rob Macnaughton used to watch him whiles, and think what a revelation these brooding thoughts would be could they be laid bare.

'You are getting to be a grand farmer, they say, Malcolm. You work all your aunt's croft yourself, don't you?'

'Ay; I could dae't twice ower noo,' said the lad, with emphasis; 'we've nae beasts noo. It's dreich work without a beast about the place.'

'Oh, but you'll get beasts again, Malky,' said Fergus cheerily, for he did not wish to get him on to the vexed question of the crofts. 'I want to hear about how you're getting on with your lessons. Can you write yet?'

'Yes, an' read an' a'; Katie learned me. She writes a graund haund,' said Malcolm proudly.

'Ay, Katie's as clever as she's bonnie; we are all proud of

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Katie,' said Fergus cheerily. 'And has Rob succeeded in teaching you Gaelic yet?'

'Some o'd,' said Malcolm, with a grin of delight; 'but it's awfu' ill. Rob's a graund man.'

'Yes, he is. And when are we to see your poetry, Malky? I know it is in you.'

A dark red flush rose slowly over the lad's face, and Fergus wondered to see his mouth tremble.

'My poetry! hoots, Rob jist havers.'

'Never a bit of him, Malky; Rob knows what's what. Make up a song about Katie. I'm sure you could never get a finer subject.'

'Katie thinks my sangs graunder than Rob's,' said Malcolm, betrayed into confidence by Fergus Macleod's cheery sympathy.

'Of course; an' so maybe will I, though the Gaelic is a want. It's a splendid language, Malcolm; I'm learning it myself, but it's worse than Greek or Latin. Well, are you going to let me have one of your songs, eh?'

'No' the nicht,' said Malcolm, actually trembling. Poor laddie! nobo' y knew what his 'sangs' were to him. Even Rob Macnaughton, a poet himself, only partially understood.

'Have you any books of poetry in the house, Malcolm? I could get some for you in Edinburgh,' said Fergus kindly.

'I have Ossian,' said Malcolm proudly. 'Rob said he wad gie me it when I could read it, and I can read it now.'

'Can you really? and do you like Ossian, Malcolm?' asked Fergus curiously, for it always seemed a lot of nonsense to him—a repeating of long fine-sounding sentences without meaning. Our Fergus was a very commonplace young man, only very honest and kind and true, which all poets are not.

'Like Ossian? I should just think it. He's graund,' said Malcolm, stretching himself up, for these were his own themes. 'He lived up by at the heid of the loch, ye ken, and he's buried in the sma' glen.'

'A bit of him, eh, Malky? Some say he's buried down at the Rumbling Brig, but we won't quarrel over Ossian's grave. Have you ever heard of Sir Walter Scott, Malky?'

'Rob whiles speaks aboot him.'

'He was a great man. I'll send you one of his books. It is called *Waverley*, and is written about Glenquaich. He once stopped in the inn at Amulree, but nobody knew. Would you like to read it?'

'Ay wad I.'

'Well, I'll send it. Stick into your books, and maybe you'll be Sir Malcolm Menzies some day. Never mind anything else. What are ye making such a face at, Malky?'

In the grey distance a horse and rider were rapidly approaching, and Fergus recognised Puddin' M'Bean. He was always called Puddin' yet, to distinguish him from his father. Puddin' had developed into a very genteel young gentleman, and had all the airs of a college-bred man. He would never be good-looking, for, though much thinner, his figure was still too broadly proportioned to be elegant, and his hair was as red and his face as freckled as ever. He was going away to Edinburgh to serve a time in the office of a Writer to the Signet, and also to attend some law classes, all with a view to fitting himself to be factor on an estate.

'Hulloa, Macleod! been at the Fauld, eh?' he said, drawing in his pony sharply, and turning him round till his hind legs were dangerously near to Malcolm Menzies. 'What time are you going off on Monday? I've been up at Dalmore.'

'Have you?' asked Fergus stiffly.

'Yes. I was asked up to tea with Miss Macdonald,' said Puddin', glorying in the words. 'Get out of the way, Malcolm Menzies. Don't you see you're annoying my pony?'

'What div I care?' asked Malcolm, and there was positively a malignant look on his face.

'Get out of the way, or I'll let you taste my whip-end,' said Puddin' angrily, but Fergus gripped him by the arm.

'Malcolm Menzies is with me, and the road is not yours, M'Bean,' he said quietly, but meaningly. 'I'll punch your head if you don't ride on.'

'Oh, very well. I beg your pardon, and Mr. Malcolm Menzies's pardon likewise,' said Angus scoffingly. 'Judge a

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And, being at a safe distance, Puddin' laughed a mocking laugh, which made Fergus long to let him feel the weight of his strong right arm.

'Never mind him, Malky. He knows no better,' said Fergus soothingly, for he saw that his companion's passion was rising. 'Where were we at? Oh, about Sir Walter Scott.'

'I'll be into him some day, and if I begin I'll no' let him aff easy, damn him,' said Malcolm, with a scowl.

It gave Fergus quite a shock to hear an oath fall from the lips of Malcolm Menzies, but he took no notice of it.

'Never mind him, Malky. He's just as impudent to me, and I never think of minding him. Do you mind the day I thrashed him, and the other day I dookit him for telling on you, when we were all at Peter Crerar's school?'

But the cloud would not lift from Malcolm's brow. It was indeed as Rob had said. He cherished a mortal hatred against the M'Beans, both father and son.

'Malky, do you ever tell Miss Sheila about your songs when she comes down?' asked Fergus, making one more effort to change the subject. To his unspeakable amazement, Malcolm, instead of giving an answer, turned round and ran off as if pursued by something evil.

Fergus looked after him a moment, not without apprehension lest it was Puddin' he was after; but Malcolm turned off the road, and cut through the moss at Lynmore towards the Fauld.

Fergus laughed. Malcolm was certainly queer. He did not, however, connect his extraordinary action in any way with the mention of Sheila's name. Fergus quickened his pace when his companion left him, and his heart was full of bitterness. He remembered the fact that Angus M'Bean should be an invited guest at Dalmore. The factor's son, ill-natured, loutish Angus M'Bean, drinking tea with Sheila in the drawing-room! Surely Rob had not exaggerated, and the M'Beans had too sure a hold on Dalmore. For two or three years now Fergus had seen very little of Sheila, and had spoken with his uncle only once since

the previous Christmas. He was never asked to Dalmore, and his mother never encouraged him to go. Nevertheless, when he came to the school corner that night, he turned along the Crieff road towards the Girron Brig. He had an errand to Dalmore.



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CHAPTER XV.

UNCLE GRAHAM.

And whispering tongues can poison truth.

COLERIDGE.

WHEN Fergus reached the house, he did not at once enter, as he had been wont to do, without giving any notice of his presence. He was now almost a stranger in Dalmore, and, besides, the familiar freedom of childhood had given place to the shyness of youth. So, after looking about him with an interest quite as keen if less boisterous than of yore, he pulled the hall bell. A strange servant who did not know him answered to his summons.

‘Can I see the Laird—Mr. Macdonald?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know, sir. The Laird sees very few. But I can take your message and your name.’

‘Perhaps I can see Miss Macdonald then,’ said Fergus quickly. ‘My name is Macleod. You do not know me, I see. I live at Shonnen Lodge.’

‘Oh, I beg pardon!’ said the woman. ‘Come in. Miss Macdonald is in the drawing-room with her governess.’

‘Thank you, I can go up; I know the way,’ said the lad, with a smile. ‘You need not tell my uncle; Miss Macdonald will take me to him.’

It was a simple thing, and the woman could not be expected to know him, yet his reception chilled the already full heart of Fergus Macleod. Inch by inch he was drifting away from Dalmore, and now he was verily a stranger within its gates. He paused on the drawing-room landing, for the memory of the last time he had been in the house swept over him. It was indeed true that he had not been within Dalmore since the day of his aunt's burying.

There was no sound issuing from the drawing-room; if it held two occupants, they were not conversing. But with a light, somewhat hesitating knock, Fergus opened the door and went in. By the fire, deeply engrossed in the pages of a book, was a young girl—two long plaits of bright brown hair hanging down her back, and a sweet girlish face supported in her hand, while her dark eyes eagerly scanned the fascinating *Waverley*, which was even then creating a great talk in the district. Could that be Sheila, the little mite in pinafores, who had come with such joyous anticipations with her mother to Dalmore! The years had changed her, and yet dealt tenderly with her; as he looked, Fergus thought he had never seen a creature more passing fair.

She was so engrossed that she did not hear him come in, but when Tory, grown old and cross, gave a short warning bark, Sheila looked round in surprise, and then sprang to her feet.

'Fergus, Fergus, is it really you?' she cried, with all the old frankness, and she advanced towards him with both her hands outstretched. There was all the familiarity of childhood mingling curiously with the shyness of young girlhood in her look and action.

'Yes; I thought you would have forgotten all about me, Sheila,' said Fergus, and they shook hands quietly; then a curious constraint fell upon them. The old bairnly love was still between them, but the years had raised a little barrier which could not be bridged all at once.

'Your governess is not with you, Sheila?' said Fergus then.

'She was here a little ago. She has gone to her own room. Have you come to stay at Shonnen for a while?'

'No. I am going away to Edinburgh on Monday. Did Angus McBean not tell you? I met him riding home from here.'

'He said he was going, but we never spoke of you. What a dandy he has grown!' said Sheila, with a little laugh, which somehow put Fergus more at his ease.

'Ay, he has a great conceit. I have come up from the Fauld, Sheila. Katie Menzies told me you were going away to school.'

'Yes, for a year to London, Fergus. I don't want to go, but Aunt Ailsa has insisted on it. She says I must see something more; and two of her other nieces, her brother's girls from Suffolk, are at the same school. I don't like to leave papa.'

'How is Uncle Graham? He is just like a shadow to me now, Sheila. I hear people speaking about him, but nobody seems to know very much about him.'

'He is not very well, poor papa.' Sheila's eyes filled with tears. She was only a girl yet, but she had acted a woman's part in Dalmore. Like Fergus, she had known very little of the ordinary pursuits and joys of childhood.

'Can I see him?'

'Of course. Will you come just now? He will have had his dinner. We do not all dine together now because papa is not able.'

'Does he ever speak about me, Sheila?'

'Not often. I don't think you have behaved very well to him, Fergus. You never come to see him when you are at Shonnen.'

'I had to obey my mother, Sheila. She will be angry to-night when she knows I am here.'

Sheila was silent. She too, like Fergus, was beginning to understand things. She knew what had built up the barrier between Shonnen and Dalmore.

'I heard a great lot of strange things at the Fauld to-day, Sheila. Did you know the folks are talking of leaving it?'

'Yes, I know. Oh, Fergus Macleod, everything is going wrong!' said Sheila, her tears starting afresh.

'Does Uncle Graham know about it? Surely he will never permit it.'

'He knows, but he is very angry with the poor people; I do not know why,' said Sheila perplexedly. 'They must have behaved very badly to him, but I can't believe it.'

'Nor I. Somebody is telling lies about them, Sheila,' said Fergus hotly. 'That is why I have come up. I want to tell my uncle how hardly they are used.'

'Perhaps you will be able to prevent them going away,' said Sheila hopefully. 'Will you come now to his room? He sits always in the library, and has his bed in the little parlour off it.'

'Very well,' said Fergus, rising readily, his heart beginning to beat with a little nervousness at the prospect of seeing his uncle. So the two went down-stairs again side by side, but never speaking a word. Even in these early days they looked a handsome, well-matched pair, the ruddy face, blue eyes, and yellow hair of Fergus contrasting well with Sheila's dark loveliness. She was yet in her unformed girlhood, in spite of her quiet, dignified, womanly way, but it was a girlhood full of loveliest promise.

Sheila gave a low soft knock at the library door and then opened it, signifying to Fergus to remain a moment in the shadow of the doorway, till she should announce his presence.

The sombre, dismal appearance of the room, with all its comforts, chilled Fergus Macleod, it seemed to speak so loudly of a man's broken hopes and retirement from the world. In the big old red leather chair close to the gleaming hearth sat Macdonald, a feeble old man.

'Dear papa, have you had your dinner?' Sheila asked, and when she reached his side, she smoothed his grey hair back from his forehead with her white soft hand.

'Yes, such as it was. What is it, Sheila?'

'I have brought some one to see you—some one who loves you very much. It is Fergus. Come in, Fergus.'

Fergus came forward, and his eyes filled with tears as he extended his hand to his uncle.

'How are you, Uncle Graham? We have not seen each other for a long time.'

'No.'

Macdonald's keen eye scanned the boy with a look which would have read his soul. It seemed to question his sincerity, and his object in coming to Dalmore. 'What do you want, lad? Something, I'll be bound, or you would not be here.'

The tone was not harsh, but it implied distrust and suspicion, which Fergus keenly felt. Sheila, conscious of it too, slipped away out of the room.

'I wanted to see you, Uncle Graham. Oh, how changed you are! Surely you are very ill.'

'They say I have no ailment, and that young doctor who has come to Dunkeld told me yesterday that it was a sin for me to sit here, and that if I had only the desire I might be quite well. It was an honest advice, but the young man does not know. You have grown. What are you about now?'

Macdonald was intimately acquainted with the whole way of life at Shonnen, and knew every movement made by his sister and her son, thanks to Mr. Angus M'Bean, but it pleased him to question Fergus himself.

'I am going away to the college in Edinburgh on Monday, Uncle Graham, to study for my degree.'

'Ah, are we to see you in the pulpit in Amulree Kirk yet, then?'

'No, not that degree. I'll never make a minister,' said Fergus quickly.

'Then what are ye to make of yourself?' asked the old man, bending his brows keenly on the boy's face.

'I don't know yet, Uncle Graham. I daresay I shall get something to do,' said Fergus bravely, though his heart was full to bursting. Never had his uncle received him so coldly, and treated him with such scornful harshness. What did it mean?

'And what's your mother saying to it now?'

'Nothing; she knows I am not to be a minister at any rate.'

'Ay, perhaps she has other views,' said Macdonald drily. 'So you think me changed, boy? and why not? I am an old man, sixty-three in November.'

'That is not very old, Uncle Graham. There are plenty men far older even in Achnafauld. Look at Donald M'Glashan's father, and Roddie Maclean past seventy, and William Sutherland eighty-one, and can build dykes yet,' said Fergus cheerfully.

'So you are still sib to all the Fauld folk, and they think you a fine young fellow, no doubt, and make a hero and a martyr of you,' said Macdonald, again with that suspicious harshness which so vexed the heart of the boy, because he could not understand it. He was not yet sufficiently versed in the guile of the world to comprehend or even suspect the underhanded villany of Angus M'Bean. He did not like the man, certainly, but had not the remotest idea of the way he had worked upon his uncle, and poisoned his mind against all truth and right.

'I have always gone back and forward to the Fauld, Uncle Graham, more since the winter I went to Peter Crerar's school,' he said in surprise. 'I was there to-day. They are in a sad way at the Fauld. Do you know about them?'

'What about them?'

'That they are so hardly dealt with, they are thinking of leaving the place.'

'Let them go! an ungrateful pack! let them go! and a good riddance,' said Macdonald fiercely. 'Their greed and their idleness surpasses anything, and makes the blood boil. Their pockets are lined with gold, they have bank accounts in Crieff and Aberfeldy bigger than mine, but they have a pauper's soul, every man among them.'

Fergus was terrified at the violence of his uncle's anger, and sat silent.

'Of course you are on their side. I have heard of you, though you have kept wisely away from Dalmore, Fergus. You are young, and easily imposed upon, and so are to be excused. The Fauld cottars are like the daughters of the horseleech. They have but one cry, and that is, Give! I have given them of my substance, potatoes for their seed, and forgiven them arrears, while they fed their beasts on my pastures

and burned my peats, and laughed in my face. That good servant and faithful friend, Angus M'Bean, has opened my eyes, and now I know them for what they are. And I never heard better news than that they are going off to this new-fangled country, because there they'll learn the lesson they richly deserve.'

Fergus was silent still. In face of these remarks, delivered with an intensity which too clearly indicated the strength of his uncle's conviction, he felt it useless to say a word. He had not, indeed, anything ready to reply, though he felt in his inmost soul the untruth and injustice of the opinions expressed. It was only since Angus M'Bean had begun to grind the cottars under his rule that they had uttered a complaint. He had taken the loch fishing from them, and the hill pasture, and had even threatened to levy a tax on the peat mosses. And though these privileges, which had been theirs from time immemorial, had been wrested from them, the rents were maintained and even added to when any tack ran out, and not a penny would he spend in repairing the miserable homesteads and outhouses in the place. It was not to be expected that the cottars, being but human, could bear these things in silence. No doubt they had their faults: some of them were lazy, and believed in getting as much as possible for their money, but they were in the main honest, hard-working, unoffending folk, who did their duty as they knew how. But Angus M'Bean had tried them beyond their endurance, and they had rebelled.

'I have found out the mistake of small holdings, Fergus Macleod. The actual money counted up may amount to more than the rental of big farms, but the privileges the cottars get soon eat up the profits. Before I die, there will be a change on the lands of Findowie and Dalmore, and whoever comes after me will be spared the cottar pest.'

Fergus sat silent still. He thought of many things to say, but seemed to be tongue-tied. His uncle's keen eyes never for a moment left his face. He saw disapproval in its expression, and it irritated him, even more than openly expressed contradiction.

'You are young, Fergus, as I said, and easily imposed upon.

Although you may never have land to look after, you may be in the way when a good advice will be of use. Treat all men as enemies till you prove them friends, and even then trust them no further than you see them. You are disapproving what I say. Some day you will remember it, and know I was right. Now, what did you come here for to-night ?'

'I came,' said Fergus boldly, then turning his fearless blue eyes on his uncle's face, 'to tell you how Angus McBean oppresses the folk. He is a wicked and cruel man, and he tells lies about them to you. You can be angry if you like, Uncle Graham ; I know I am speaking the truth.'

'Ay, ay ! it is but as Angus said. He is a shrewd man. Did ye not come up, Fergus, to see whether I was near my end ? Are ye hungering after the place, like your neighbours in the Fauld ?'

Young though he was, Fergus Macleod understood and keenly felt the insinuation his uncle made. He sprang up, the ruddy colour deepening on his face, and turned about without a word to seek the door. He had his hot temper too, and was easily roused to anger.

'Come back, ye whelp ! that touches ye on the sore bit,' said Macdonald, grimly enjoying the boy's discomfiture. 'Come back and sit down. Be honest now, Fergus Macleod. Have ye not begun to think what fine things you would do were you Laird of Dalmore ?'

'Uncle Graham, I'm going away home. Good-night,' said Fergus quietly.

'What are ye greetin' for, ye big bairn ? I would like ye none the less were ye to tell me honestly. It's but what I expect,' said Macdonald gruffly, yet with more real kindness than he had yet shown. 'What are ye looking at now ?'

'At that,' said Fergus, pointing with his forefinger to a portrait of his uncle's wife which hung above the fireplace, and which he never remembered having seen before.

Graham Macdonald's eye followed the lad's gesture and glance, and his head fell down upon his breast. If Angus

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M'Bean had only known it, the sweet pathetic mouth and the mild eyes of that speaking likeness were the strongest barrier in the way of his high-handed dealing with the people.

Ay, had the mistress of Dalmore but lived, there had been better days for the people of Achnaufauld.

'Leave me, boy, just now,' said Macdonald at length, while Fergus stood irresolute at the door, his heart yearning over his uncle. 'Come again when you are at Shonnen; Sheila likes to see you.'

And with that Fergus had to be content. He had no heart to go back to the drawing-room, but Sheila, listening for his step, came running down to say good-bye.

'Are you not coming up a little while, Fergus?' she asked timidly.

'No; my mother will wonder why I have been so long. Good-bye, Sheila; I hope you will like the boarding-school.'

'I don't think I shall,' she said, as she gave him her hand.

Poor bairns! they were both miserable, they did not know why.

'You'll come back a fine lady, Sheila, who has forgotten all about her old chum,' said Fergus.

'No, no, I won't. Oh, Fergus Macleod, I wish the days we used to fish in the Girron Burn, you and Colin and me, could come back, I am so lonely up here by myself.'

'You have Uncle Graham and Puddin' M'Bean,' said Fergus, with a kind of subdued viciousness which gave his feelings immense relief. Then, though her eyes were wet, a peal of laughter broke from Sheila's lips which woke a thousand sweet echoes through the quiet house.

'You might give me a kiss for Colin's sake,' said Fergus in a queer, shy way. 'We won't likely see each other for a long time.'

'I'll kiss you for your own sake, Fergus,' said Sheila frankly and sweetly, and without a shade of embarrassment. In many things she was but a child still.

It was many a long day before they kissed each other again.



CHAPTER XVI.

MOTHER AND SON.


He must gain his end
Although in gaining he offend
Or even sacrifice a friend.

J. B. SELKIRK.



THE years had dealt very gently with Ellen Macleod. She had not much to trouble her in her house of Shonnen. Her means were sufficient for her needs, and Fergus was her only anxiety. She had trained him to strict obedience, and had hitherto had no reason to complain of him. He had gone to Perth, and shared Puddin' McBean's lodging without saying a word, though he felt it keenly. The close intimacy of that semi-home life had not at all increased Fergus Macleod's liking for the cowardly boy who had made himself so obnoxious to the Fauld bairns. But he stifled these feelings, and did his best to get along comfortably with Angus when they were at school.

Angus, who had a wholesome memory of the smart punishment Fergus had twice inflicted upon him, left him in peace. But though the boys ate, and learned, and slept together, they were in no sense of the word chums, and it was a mistake to put them together. That trial, one of no ordinary kind for Fergus, was now past, and his college days promised fairer than those he had spent at school. He need not see anything of Puddin' unless he liked, and that was something. Ellen Macleod



had not relinquished the hope of seeing Fergus a minister yet, though she had learned to hold her peace about it. She had also another hope, of which she said even less. The only person to whom she spoke of it with any freedom was Angus M'Bean, the factor. That astute individual was playing a double game, which in the end would result in his own discomfiture. In the meantime, however, he was flourishing like the proverbial green bay tree. The house of Auchloy had been enlarged and adorned until it looked more like a small mansion than a farmer's abode. Mrs. M'Bean had now her cook and housemaid, with whom, poor body, she had but a sorry time. A drawing-room furnished in green satin and adorned by numerous white starched tidies and woollen mats was at once the anxiety and the pride of her life. Then the two Miss M'Beans were being educated at a select school in Perth, from which they would shortly return, full of airs, if not of graces, to further exercise the spirit of their plain but truly good-hearted mother. Had Mrs. M'Bean not stood in mortal terror of her spouse, she would have given him a piece of her mind about his dealings with the peasantry, of which she did not at all approve. Her sympathies were entirely with her old neighbours in the Fauld, and she gave them many substantial expressions of it out of her husband's knowledge.

It was half-past seven that night when Fergus opened the garden gate at Shonnen. He had walked round by the road and across the Amulree Bridge, the night being too dark for him to cross the Braan by the stepping-stones. He had not hurried on his way, however, being engrossed by his own thoughts. There were many things weighing on the boy's mind and heart.

'You are very late, Fergus,' his mother said, in her habitually severe voice. Fergus could certainly not associate anything bright with his mother. She still wore the repulsive head-dress which, as a child, had frightened him, the only alteration being that she had cut off the long crape which used to hang down her back.

'Oh, mother, I am very sorry! I hope you did not wait,' cried Fergus in his quick way, the spread table reminding him of tea.

‘Of course I waited. Ring the bell for Jessie Mackenzie to bring in the teapot, and tell me where you have been.’

Tea was still on the table in the dining-room, and his mother severely sitting by the fire waiting.

Fergus was so accustomed to be cross-examined, and to give a minute account of his doings, that he thought nothing of it.

‘I was at the Fauld, mother, seeing all the old people. Jenny Menzies can’t stand or walk now with her rheumatism. But Katie is a great help. Mother, you wouldn’t know Katie Menzies now, she is such a bonnie girl.’

‘Seeing I never saw her, I don’t suppose I should,’ said Ellen Macleod drily.

‘You know who she is, though, mother,’ said Fergus, with his mouth full. ‘And Malcolm is quite a man. Then I saw Rob Macnaughton, and that was all. Oh, mother, just think! The folks are speaking about emigrating, of going away to America, actually. Isn’t it fearful?’

‘What’s set them to think of that?’ asked Ellen Macleod quietly, though she knew the whole affairs of the Fauld better than Fergus could tell her. It was long since she had heard the emigration rumour.

‘Oh, the shameful way they are treated by Angus M’Bean’ cried Fergus hotly. ‘You wouldn’t believe how they are treated. Do you know, mother, there is hardly a horse or a cow in the Fauld now, and not a sheep? The hill pasture is taken from them. It’s perfectly abominable the way Angus M’Bean is doing, and the worst of it all is, that he has made Uncle Graham believe they are to blame. Mother, I do think he is a horrid, bad, greedy man.’

‘So they’ve stuffed your head finely for you at the Fauld,’ said Ellen Macleod, with that curious smile of hers, which was no smile at all. ‘Did you never hear that every story has two sides, Fergus?’

‘Oh, I know, but anybody can see whose side is right. Mother, how can they make a living and pay their rents off these little crofts, when they’ve nothing to feed a beast on?’

‘They wouldn’t say anything about their spinning and weaving. Go up to Turchardie Mill when you’ve time, Fergus,

and see what Walter Lachlan has to say about the Fauld folks and their earnings.'

'But, mother, they can't spin and weave when they've no wool, nor sheep to clip?' maintained Fergus hotly.

'They spin flax yet, though.'

'Yes, but if they grow flax on their crofts, they can't grow corn and potatoes,' said Fergus shrewdly. 'Oh, mother, you know I am right, and it's a cruel shame the way they are treated—that's what I think.'

'Were you anywhere else than the Fauld, then? I thought you had maybe gone up to Auchloy to your tea.'

'O no, thank you! I've seen plenty of Puddin'; and his sisters are awful, mother. You should hear their fine English,' said Fergus, with boyish candour. 'But I've been up at Dalmore.'

'At Dalmore!' Ellen Macleod's brow darkened. 'What were you doing there?'

'I went to see Uncle Graham.'

'And did you see him?' she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her annoyance.

'Yes, I saw him.'

'Is it true he is as ill as they say?'

'Mother, I don't think Uncle Graham will live long,' said Fergus, and his lips quivered. Memory was faithful in the boy's true heart. The sad changes the years had wrought could not destroy his old-time confidence, his old-time love for Uncle Graham.

'What did he say to you?'

'Not very much. He does not care about me now, I think,' said Fergus, in a low, uncertain voice, for there was a lump in his throat.

'Did u think he would?' asked his mother, in bitter scorn. 'Your day is past, my lad. Did you see the girl, his daughter, as he calls her?'

'Yes, I saw Sheila.'

'It is she who has turned your uncle against you, and who has supplanted you in Dalmore.'

'I don't care for that. I don't believe it. I like Sheila,

She is as different from Bessie and Kate McBean as night from day. I never saw a nicer girl in my life than Sheila, and I'm very sorry for her. She is miserable up in that lonely house.'

'Boy, you have a craven spirit. How will you look when your uncle is carried to Shian, and that chit is lady of Dalmore?'

'I don't know,' said Fergus, in a low voice. 'She will be kind to the people, anyway. She won't believe all Angus McBean tells her.'

'Fergus Macleod, you have a causeless resentment against Angus McBean, who is your true friend and mine,' said Ellen Macleod, in a low, impressive voice. 'You are sixteen and a half years old, and should understand things now, so I shall speak plainly to you. Angus McBean is doing his utmost to work against the influence that girl and the Murrays have over your uncle. I don't blame her much as yet, for she is young; but the Murrays are doing their utmost to get your uncle to make her his heiress, and if they succeed, you will be a nameless beggar on the face of the earth.'

'Oh, mother, I am not a beggar just now. I shall not be any worse off then, shall I?' asked Fergus, not greatly impressed by his mother's speech.

'Boy, you make me think shame for you,' she cried, growing white with passion. 'Have you no ambition for yourself? Will you be perfectly well pleased to see Sheila Murray and her horde of relatives ruling in Dalmore. Your heritage! What right have they with it? If Graham Macdonald wilfully passes over his own kindred at the last, a curse will dwell upon Dalmore. I will invoke it if none else will.'

Ah, Ellen Macleod! it is long since your evil resentment cursed Dalmore. By the memory of her who sleeps in the old graveyard at Shian, spare the innocent bairn who never did you harm.

'Mother, I suppose Uncle Graham can do what he likes with his own,' said Fergus wearily. 'I would like very well to be Laird of Dalmore, for I like the place better than any place in the world. But I'm not going to beg for it, nor seek to turn Sheila out. If you knew Sheila, mother, you would feel the

same as me. I can work for my living, and keep you and myself, too, yet; wait till you see.'

These words were more bitter than gall to the proud, ambitious heart of Ellen Macleod. She almost hated the boy for his lack of spirit, not knowing, poor blind creature, that he was showing a noble, generous, unselfish spirit a king might have envied. With all her harsh training, she had not been able to warp or curb that pure soul, which had a heritage greater and more to be desired than any earthly estate.

She rose from her seat and flounced out of the room, leaving Fergus perplexed and more miserable than ever.

He drew in a chair to the fire and sat down to think over what his mother had said, but his reverie was soon broken by a hard knock at the front door. When he heard Angus M'Bean's voice asking for his mother, he rose up hurriedly and ran off up-stairs to his own little room, feeling that he could not bear to meet the factor just then. He shut the door and sat down by the window, and, leaning his head on his hand, looked out away across by Amulree, to where a bonnie moon was rising above Crom Creagh. Its light did not as yet touch Dalmore, but he knew the exact spot where the house stood, and he had no need of light to guide his eyes to it. Ay, the lad loved Dalmore with a great love, and he knew that to call it his home, and to have in his hand the welfare of the folk among whom he had been reared, would be the happiest destiny he could ask on earth. But though he knew that there was a grain of truth in what his mother had said, and that Sheila stood between him and Dalmore, it made no difference in his feeling towards her. They had been bairns together, all in all to each other in the long days of that first beautiful summer when they had made acquaintance first, and the tie of bairnly love is one which is not easily severed. It would take even more than separation from Dalmore to break the sweet spell of the old trysts by the Girron Brig. He heard Angus M'Bean go into the dining-room and his mother join him there; then the door was shut, and only the subdued murmur of voices indicated that they were in conversation.

Ellen Macleod was always courteous to Angus M'Bean, and

believed him to be her true friend, while he was only seeking to serve his own ends. He knew the Laird was failing daily, and as he had as yet no idea what were his intentions regarding his property and estate, it behoved him to keep on good terms with both Shonnen and Dalmore. He hoped, however, for his own sake, that Sheila was to be the heiress. A weak, inexperienced girl would be much more easily dealt with than Ellen Macleod and her high-spirited, generous-minded boy. If Fergus Macleod ever became Laird of Dalmore, Angus M'Bean had a good guess that his own day would be over. Therefore it behoved him to make hay while the sun shone.

'A fine night, but cold. Winter will be upon us before we know where we are,' said the factor, as he shook hands with Mrs. Macleod. 'It's a winter moon that's up to-night.'

'Is it? Fergus has just come in. Excuse the table. Will you have a cup of tea?'

'No, thank you; just come from it. We have a lively house just now with Angus and the girls. They are aye squabbling, and the piano goes from morning till night,' said the factor rather proudly. 'I don't know what the wife and I will do next week when the young folks leave us.'

'Are your daughters going back to school? They will be quite accomplished young ladies,' said Ellen Macleod, not without a touch of amused scorn. She was often amused at the conceits of the factor, and certainly thought his ideas above his position.

'They are smart girls, I own, and I'm expecting Angus to do great things at college. I hope he and Mr. Fergus will continue to be friendly, and to keep each other out of bad company.'

'I am not afraid of my son,' said Ellen Macleod rather haughtily. 'He has been up at Dalmore seeing his uncle to-night.'

'Has he? And what—how did they get on?' asked the factor nervously, not at all sure about what might have been the meaning or issue of the interview.

'The boy was grieved to see his uncle so ill. He thinks him dying. Is the Laird so far spent, Mr. M'Bean?'

'I—I really can't tell. Of course I am seeing him often. Of course he is weak, but that young Doctor Culbard, who has come to Dunkeld,—a clever fellow they say,—actually told me yesterday, the Laird had not a single ailment, and that he might live twenty years yet, if he would only make up his mind to do it. But I myself don't think, Mrs. Macleod, that he will last as many weeks.'

'Mr. McBean,' said Ellen Macleod, with a slight hesitation (for she had her own pride, and it sometimes reminded her that it was scarcely fit that she should discuss family matters with a servant), 'have you ever heard the Laird say aught about Dalmore? Is it likely he will leave the place to Alastair Murray's child?'

'The Lord forbid!' said the factor quickly. 'There is no doubt that she will get a good slice of it—Findowie, perhaps. He was suggesting to me something about repairing the old house on it. But he'll never pass by Mr. Fergus, his own flesh and blood.'

'Has he ever spoken about it to you at all?'

'Well, no, not exactly; but, of course, I can see his drift,' said the factor, not choosing to confess that he was as completely ignorant of Macdonald's intentions as Ellen Macleod herself.

'Well, it would be a sin and a shame; but mark me, Angus McBean, it would not greatly surprise me. Fergus is in a terrible way about this talk of emigration in the Fauld.'

'I knew he would be. He's got a soft heart, and they've got round him completely. Some day I expect Mr. Fergus will thank me for ridding Dalmore of these discontented cottars. They are a great toil and anxiety. I'm getting my blessings in Achmafauld just now, Mrs. Macleod. They're all on my tap, and they've even threatened me with bullets, to say nothing of Ewan McFadyen's lang-nebbit maledictions, which are fearsome to listen to. I hope the emigration craze will only hold. There's one nest I would like cleaned out among the rest, and that's the Menzies's. That Malcolm's no' canny. Were he in the town, he would be in an asylum.'

'Fergus is especially fond of the Menzies's,' said Ellen Mac-

leod, with a slight smile. 'I do not comprehend the boy. He has not a soul above the affairs of the common folk. He would rather sit an hour with the stocking weaver than be Laird of Dalmore.'

'He's but a lad. Edinburgh will bring him to his level,' said the factor knowingly. 'Take my word for it, Mrs. Macleod, he'll meet the gentry in Edinburgh, and learn to be proud of his mother's folks. I'm no' feared for Mr. Fergus being able to uphold his position in Dalmore; and he'll change his ideas, too, about the Fauld folk.'

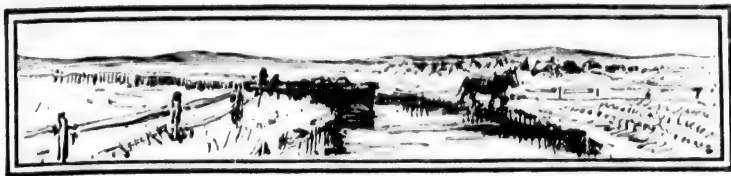
'He is their enthusiastic advocate in the meantime, at any rate. None of the lawyers have ever been at Dalmore that you know of, then?'

'No; and Maggie Macintosh, that was with my wife at Auchloy, and is kitchen-maid at Dalmore, brings all the news. I'll let ye ken, ma'am, whatever happens. I'm yours and Mr. Fergus's humble servant, and I hope to see ye yet where ye should be, and should aye hae been,' said the factor, in his blindest mood.

Strange that Ellen Macleod should believe in the sincerity of such a man. In the wide world, Angus M'Bean of Auchloy would serve but one master, and that was—Self.



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CHAPTER XVII.

CHUMS.

A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.

LONGFELLOW.

FERGUS had rebelled against sharing loogings in Edinburgh with Angus M'Bean, and so the opening of the University session found him domiciled alone in a small but comfortable room in the top flat of a house in Montagu Street. It seemed strange to the boy at first to be confined to so small a space, but from his window he could catch a glimpse of the corner of Arthur's Seat, and the grim outline of Salisbury Crags, and that view was the greatest comfort the Highland boy had in town. It reminded him of home. It must not be supposed, however, that he was at all miserable in Edinburgh. At first the change and its constant bustle were delightful to him; there was so much to see in spare hours and on holidays, that he never wearied, even for home.

He speedily made acquaintance among the students, and became very friendly with a big, good-natured lad, with a smile and a kindly eye which seemed familiar to Fergus. When he learned his name he knew at once where he had seen these eyes before. The lad was Alastair Murray, from Murrayshaugh; and he was his mother's son. Young Murray was boarded with a very select family in Great King Street, and lived in a very

different style from Fergus; but that did not prevent the two from becoming inseparable chums. Alastair was supposed to be studying for his degree likewise, but was too idle and easy-minded to oppress himself much with books. The lads sat side by side in the Humanity class room, but Alastair took in very little of the learned professor's lectures. Fergus, however, did his best. He was conscientious in everything, and, as he had been sent to college to learn, he did learn. But on half-holidays and Saturdays, Alastair and he took long walks together all over Edinburgh and its beautiful environs, and were as chummy and as devoted to each other as boys of that age can be. Alastair wrote home when the spirit moved him, and his letters were filled with Fergus Macleod; and when Lady Ailsa read them, she smiled a bit quiet smile to herself, and wrote back to her boy to keep up his friendship with Fergus, and be as kind to him as possible. In her own mind she knew that old Time, the stern and just, would heap revenges on Ellen Macleod's head, and that the bairns among them, if let alone, would heal the old sores. Fergus had no sweet mother to whom he could pour out his boyish confidences. He wrote home dutifully every Saturday morning, faithfully rehearsing his week's work; and, though he might mention that he was going for a stroll to Craigmillar Castle, or a ramble through the Pentlands, he never by any chance wrote down the name of Alastair Murray. He had an uneasy feeling that his mother would not approve of his intimacy with Lady Ailsa's son; and yet when Alastair was such a jelly fellow, to whom his boyish affection went out, how could he cast him off? So the winter went by, and cemented yet more closely the tie of friendship between them. Each was utterly devoted to the other, and each believed the other the best fellow in the world. At Christmas, Alastair Murray went home, but Fergus had to remain over the holidays in town. The journey was long and expensive; besides, the world about Amulree in the latter end of December was shut in by drifts, which were no mean rivals to the hills themselves. The hawthorn bloom had been thick and white in Strathbraan all through the summer, and the haws ruddy on the boughs later on, and they had not belied their

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promise of a snowy Christmas. So Fergus wandered about the town in the holidays, thinking how ugly it looked, with its trampled snow and smoky, murky atmosphere, and thought of the wild beauties of Amulree, of the tender outlines of the wreaths in the roads, and even pictured the wild winds swirling the drifts in Glen Lochan like an unseen hand stirring a witch's cauldron. The wee glen at the head of Loch Fraochie was a fearsome place in a snowstorm, Fergus knew. He went often to the Queen's Park to slide on the lochs, and thought them mean in comparison with his own Fraochie, which all the winter through was a vast curling-ground. He was glad when the recess was over, and the students came back to town. Alastair was not at college on the first day, but next morning, when Fergus was walking briskly up and down the quadrangle at lunch-time, he felt Alastair's big hand slap him on the back.

'Hulloa, Fergie!'

'Hulloa! got back, Alastair?' said Fergus heartily. Then they linked arms, and went round and round the quadrangle to exchange news. Of course Alastair had the most to give, for Lady Ailsa always made Christmas a happy time for her boys, and grudged them no enjoyment.

'Oh, I say, Fergie, there's an awful din going on up at your place,' said Alastair suddenly. 'The folks have all left their farms, and they're going off to America. I heard them talking about it at home.'

Instantly Fergus was breathlessly interested. Though his mother wrote to him regularly, she never mentioned anything about the Fauld folks, nor any matters connected with the estate.

'Are they going soon? Tell me all about it, Alastair, quick!'

'Oh, I don't know much. But surely your uncle has a mean sneak of a fellow for a factor. Hasn't he put them out? I thought my mother said that.'

'He's helped anyway. Yes, he's a mean sneak,' said Fergus gloomily, but with an angry flash of his eye. 'But they can't go over the Atlantic just now.'

'Why not? I think they are going just now; at least, they're out of their places.'

'Well, but it is Upper Canada they are going to, and the ships can't get up the St. Lawrence for the ice,' said Fergus. 'If they are out of their farms, where are they living?'

'Oh, I don't know. Doesn't your mother tell you all these sort of things when she writes? Mine does.'

'She didn't tell me anything about this. Oh, Alastair, I wish I could get home!' said Fergus, in a tone of such painful inquiry that Alastair looked at him in amazement.

'What for, Fergie?'

'To see what's going on. It'll be April before I'm home, and if they're all away I don't know what I'll do.'

'But how does it matter to you? You aren't the Laird,' said Alastair, in rather a perplexed voice.

'No; but I like all these folks. There's Donald McGlashan, and old Dugald, and Rob Macnaughton, only I don't think he'll be going. I wish I could see them, if only to say good-bye.'

'Oh, well, perhaps they won't be going till the spring, for the ice,' said Alastair, who was not very clear on that point. 'Likely they'll all be there when you get back. The session ends on the 28th of March, and jolly glad I'll be when it comes. It's not much more than two months, Fergie, so cheer up.'

But Fergus was very down-hearted all day, and whenever he got home to his lodgings, he wrote a hasty letter to his mother, asking for all the news about the Fauld. In his absorbing interest about the cottars, he forgot his usual reticence regarding Alastair, and just wrote down that he had brought the news back from Murrayshaugh. Ellen Macleod had herself to blame for the way in which Fergus withheld his confidence from her. When had she encouraged it, or shown herself in the light of a sympathetic, interested friend to her boy? She had frozen the mainsprings of his fresh, warm, impulsive young heart long ago, and could scarcely resent its lukewarmness now. Fergus knew the name of Murray was distasteful to her, and, grown worldly wise even in his young boyhood, refrained from inflict-

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ing it upon her. At the expiry of a week his mother's usual letter arrived, and, though she signified her receipt of his extra epistle, she merely said that she did not concern herself with affairs which were not her own. She had noted the name of Alastair Murray, but did not take notice of it in her reply. In the heat of his disappointment and eager desire to know really what was going on in Achnafauld, Fergus sat down and indited a hasty, boyish screed to Rob Macnaughton, the stocking-weaver, asking him to send him a long letter telling all that had transpired in the Fauld since he left the Glen. That letter Rob Macnaughton treasured among his most precious documents till his dying day.

In a day or two there came back an answer, written in rather a cramped, unsteady hand, no less a personage than Ewan McFadyen, the precentor, having taken it upon himself to reply on behalf of Rob, who was confined to his bed with rheumatism, and could not hold the pen in his stiff fingers. Rheumatism was a common complaint in Achnafauld in the winter time—the moist atmosphere, and the low-lying, damp situation of the houses, accounted for it. This letter of Ewan's, written in his most grandiloquent style, is quite worthy of publication. Fergus kept it long in his possession as a curiosity, and I am not sure but that it is still extant among the papers in the library at Dalmore.

ACHNAFAULD,

GLENQUAICH, AMULREE, BY DUNKELD,

The 16th day of January,

Eighteen hundred and forty-eight, *Anno Domini*.

To Mr. Fergus Macleod, at the College, in Edinburgh.

RESPECTED SIR,—

I am organized by my disabled friend, Mr. Robert Macnaughton, to indite a suitable and permanent reply to your honoured communication anent the agitation which has shaken this hamlet, nay, this entire glen, from east or west, to its solid foundation. This I will make it my endeavour to do to the utmost of my tolerable ability, and do but prefer a humble request that a student of so great and philosophical a college will be pleased to overlook and pass by any slight deviation from the straight equilibrium of grammatical correctness.

Rob Macnaughton, being in haste, requests me not to dissipate your attention with my fine language, which, I confess, I am a master of, but I take it upon me to venture the supposition that even in my finest style I shall hardly be equal to the occasion. I will endeavour, however, in acquiescence with Rob's desire, to inform you briefly what the facts of this interesting case are, as follows, viz. :—That the following responsible heads of households—viz. :—

James Stewart, formerly of Turrich ;
 Alexander Maclean, cottar in Achnafauld ;
 Thomas Macnaughton, do. do.
 Rory Maclean, do. do.
 William Crierar, do. do.
 Donald Macalpine, do. and blacksmith ;

and the undersigned, viz. Ewan M'Fadyen, cottar, and also precentor, viz. leader of the praise in the kirk of Amulree, have resolved and determined in a solemn league and covenant, on account of the oppression and impidence of that upstart and contemptible truckler, Angus M'Bean in Auchloy, to turn our respective backs upon the land of our birth and breeding, and cross the seas to a new and unexplored region which knows not Joseph, and this our families have agreed to, and it is our fixed intention to shake the dust from off our feet in the spring-time,—that vernate season when all nature rejoices, except ourselves,—and with every symptom of respect to Mr. Fergus Macleod,

His humble servant,

EWAN M'FADYEN.

The close of Ewan's epistle bore unmistakeable traces of haste. Rob, indeed, had lost patience with his scribe's verbosity, and had thrown a book at his head. But, in spite of the long words and fine-sounding phrases, the meaning was perfectly clear. It was indeed clear that Angus M'Bean had succeeded in completely souring the small tenants in Dalmore. And they, foreseeing no prospect of any betterment in their situation, had wisely resolved to gird up their loins while they had yet a little left in their wallets, and seek a home in that distant land of which such good reports had reached them. Now that he knew the worst, Fergus felt more contented, although wearying to get home to hear fuller particulars.

He had seen Puddin' M'Bean several times in Edinburgh, but did not consort at all with him. Alastair Murray, who, is

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spite of his good-nature, had a pride of his own, declined to stand on any footing with the factor's son at Auchloy. That red-haired fellow from Glenquaich did not find favour in the eyes of handsome, high-born Alastair Murray.

The brief spring session passed at length, and on the 28th of March Fergus Macleod returned home. Alastair, Angus M'Bean, and he travelled by the same train. The Highland line was being formed, and had now reached Ballinluig, so that the lads got home all the way to Dunkeld by train. The factor's smart dogcart was in waiting for young Angus, the factor himself driving.

'Hulloa! how are you, Mr. Fergus? Jump up,' said the factor familiarly, when Fergus came off the platform. But, to his amazement, Fergus only gave him a haughty little nod.

'No, thank you, I'm going to walk. Here's your trap, Alastair,' he said, turning away from the M'Beans and speaking to his friend.

'But, Mr. Fergus, Mrs. Macleod said I was to bring you up,' said the factor. 'Come.'

'No, thank you,' repeated Fergus. 'Tell my mother I'm walking, and that I'll be up before it's dark.'

'All right,' said Angus M'Bean, trying to speak pleasantly, though he was very angry. 'He's trying to show off before young Murrayshaugh, but I'll take it out of him,' he added to his son. 'In with you, Angus, and let's off.'

'You can't walk all that distance, Fergie,' said Alastair, in concern. 'Come on home with me, and you'll get Dick's pony.'

'O no, Alastair. Ten miles! I'll walk that in two hours and a half easily,' cried Fergus cheerily. 'Good-bye; I hope we'll see each other in the holidays.'

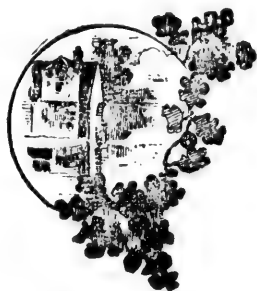
'See each other! of course. If the weather keeps like this, there'll be some rare fishing in the Logie. Of course you'll come over for a few days. My mother will settle all that.'

So they shook hands and parted, Alastair to drive rapidly home to the hearty, loving welcome of Murrayshaugh, and Fergus to trudge manfully up the brae and through Strath-

braan to Amulree. The Laird's nephew walked afoot, carrying his bag, while the Laird's factor covered the miles with the fleet thoroughbred for which the spoil of the cottars had paid. The brief soreness Fergus had felt at the station soon wore off, and he began to take interest in what was about him. Never had the green and lovely Athole woods seemed so passing fair as they did that April day, to the country boy whose eyes had grown weary of the town. He turned back again and again to look at the rugged face of Craigybarns, which was clothed with the rich mosaic of her spring-tide hues. The green banks of the noble Tay were like finest emerald velvet, and the river itself flashed and rippled in the sunlight, till its beauty filled the boy's whole soul. He was neither an artist nor a poet, but he felt it all in his soul, and loved the land of his birth better than anything in the world. He had to stop at one part of the road and look away up the glen past Dalguise and Dowally to the green braes of Tullymet and the purple hills in the distance, a picture whose marrow he had never seen. He saw the trouts leaping in the gleaming pools in the Braan, which were shaded by the drooping birch trees and the golden tassels of the larches, and his young heart leaped too, for the world was a lovely world, and life was all before him. So on he trudged past Trochrie, and on to Drumour and Tomnagrew, where the landscape grew more bare and treeless, though not less beautiful in the eyes of Fergus Macleod. When he got up to the crest of the brae by Dalreoch, he saw Crom Creagh, and the sunset shafts of golden light falling athwart the windows of Dalmore. Then he dashed his hand across his eyes, for they were wet. God guide the boy! he had an earnest heart, and already he had been sorely tried. Just then he met Tom Macnaughton, the blind piper, dressed in his kilt, away to play at a marriage in Ballinreich, and of course he had to stand and crack a bit with him, for the piper knew the lad's foot before he came up. It was about eight o'clock, and, the sun being down, a soft golden haze enveloped the whole glen, when Fergus Macleod laid his hand on the gate of Shonnen. He felt no thrill of delight as he did so, for he had no love for the place, nor had it ever possessed for him any of the attrac-

tions of home. His mother was watching for him, and came out to the door to meet him with but a chilly welcome on her lips.

'Ye are a fool, Fergus, to walk the road ye might have ridden. Whether is it pride or thrawnness that makes you so sorry civil to Mr. M'Bean of Auchloy?'





CHAPTER XVIII.

HOME AGAIN.

The short but simple annals of the poor.

GRAY.

FLLEN MACLEOD was glad to see her son, however, in spite of her scanty welcome, and when he sat down to tea her eye viewed him with keen pride. He had grown a manly fellow, and there was the dawn of manhood in his look and manner. Fergus was no longer a boy, to be chidden and ordered even by his mother. So she alluded no more to his refusal to ride up in Angus M'Bean's trap.

'Mother, what's all this about the Fauld?' he asked, in his quick way. 'Are they really going away? I can't believe it.'

'Oh, it's true enough. They go to Glasgow, I'm told, the day after to-morrow. Silly fools, they don't know when they are well off. So Lady Ailsa's son brought you the news. Are you intimate with him, Fergus?'

'O yes; Alastair is a splendid fellow, mother!' said Fergus enthusiastically. 'We are the best of chums, and spend our Saturdays together, always.'

'It seems as if you purposely made friendships and did things to vex me, Fergus. The Murrays are not your true friends. Have you forgotten that this lad and Sheila Murray are full cousins?'

'No; but, mother, I can't make any difference. I can't always mind that people are not my friends, as you say. I like Alastair, and always will. And as for being Sheila's cousin,' he added, with a light laugh, 'we agree perfectly about her. Sheila is everybody's chum at Murrayshaugh; but she's mine too, when she's in Amulree.'

These words were bitter as gall to Ellen Macleod, but she passed them by in silence.

'Mother, I'm going to run along to the Fauld; I must see the old folks. I won't be more than an hour, and it is quite light yet.'

'All right! I would not keep you from your friends,' she said, with a slight touch of scorn. 'I heard of the letter you wrote to the stocking-weaver. It was not wisely done, Fergus.'

'Why? Oh, mother, I had such a letter from Ewan McFadyen!' cried Fergus mirthfully. 'It is in my bag. We can see it after. It is full of the longest words you ever saw or heard of. Rob's cripple leg was bothering him, and his rheumatic arm, so that he could not write.'

'I am not much interested in these ungrateful people,' was the cold reply. 'I want to hear about your college life. Angus McBean has done very well, his father tells me.'

'I know nothing about him, except that he went with fellows who could not do him any good,' said Fergus coolly. 'Of course he did not belong to our set. Puddin' soon found his level in Edinburgh College, mother. A cad is soon spotted there.'

'What do you mean by these strange, ill-bred words, Fergus?'

'I beg your pardon, mother. One can't help picking up a little slang. I meant to say that an ungentlemanly fellow is soon marked; and, in spite of his fine clothes and airs, Puddin' will never be anything but just Puddin' McBean. How are Bessie and Kate? Do you ever see them?'

'Occasionally. They are well-bred girls. Angus McBean has credit by his family.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Fergus carelessly. 'Oh, mother, how bonnie Amulree is looking just now, with all the green leaves on the manse trees!'

Fergus said the manse trees, but he was thinking and speaking of the woods about Dalmore.

'Uncle Graham is no worse, is he?'

'Not that I know of,' answered his mother. 'You won't stay late, then, if you are going. Remember, you owe a duty to me. You have been away from me more than six months.'

'And jolly glad to get home, I can tell you,' said Fergus cheerily. 'No, I won't be long. I only want to ask for Rob, and shake hands with the smith, and have a peep at Katie Menzies.'

So saying, Fergus caught up his cap and ran out whistling, his spirits overflowing with the joy of being once more at home. He missed Colin at his heels. That faithful friend was now dead, and there was no dog at Dalmore but poor Tory, who in his old age had grown very dyspeptic, and consequently was very lazy and cross.

Ellen Macleod went out to the door and watched the lad's fine figure as he marched along the stony road towards Kinloch — watched him with all a mother's pride. She loved him more in his independent young manhood than she had loved him in his childhood. His spirit and his pride matched her own, though it was of a mellowed and more beautiful type. Fergus never looked back, but strode on, with many a glance, it is true, over the moors to Dalmore, about which the grey night-shadows were gathering softly, as if in pity for the old house which was now so desolate a home. The loch was lying darkly in the shadow too, for the sunset glow never touched it; but it was wholly beautiful in the eyes of the lad, as he stood a moment on the old bridge and watched it and the river which flowed so deep and silent and swiftly below. He could almost fancy he saw the big hungry pike darting to and fro in the gleaming depths below the bridge; for by some strange means pike had come to Loch Fraochie, and helped to devour the trout which used to be netted for the folks who stayed over the protracted communion services at Amulree. Over the bridge and up through the grassy path went Fergus, and came upon Malcolm Menzies, working, though it was nearly dark, on the potato land, preparing it for the seed.

'Hullo, Malky! here I am again. No holidays for you, my boy, eh? Do you ever give yourself a rest?'

'I dinna need it. I'm best workin' hard. It keeps me doon, as Katie says,' said Malcolm, as he stood up, his face all aglow with pleasure at sight of his old companion and defender.

'You are looking much bigger and stronger, Malky. How's Katie?'

'Katie's fine.'

'And Aunt Jenny, eh?'

'Fine too, though she canna rise noo, nor help hersel.'

'So you are to lose a lot of your neighbours, Malky? The Fauld will be dull enough without them all.'

'Ay; but I'm gled Rob Macnaughton has a cripple leg.'

'To keep him at home,' laughed Fergus. 'You and Katie are not going either. I'm very glad.'

'I wad gang if it werena for Katie, Mr. Fergus,' said Malcolm, with a curious gleam in his eye. 'There's whiles I canna bide here hardly. The factor's aye meddlin' wi' me. He says I canna ferm the land, but I see weel eneuch he's wantin' us oot o' this Fauld an' a'.'

'Never mind him, Malky; he can't put you out unless you are willing to go.'

'I dinna ken. He says he'll rise the rent, an' it's ower dear already. We've to pay for horse wark too, ye ken, an' that disna pay. Is Puddin' hame frae the college too?'

'Yes; but you mustn't call him Puddin' now, Malcolm, he is such a fine young gentleman. He wears a gold finger ring and has a silver-topped cane,' said Fergus, with a laugh.

'I hope he'll bide oot o' my road,' said Malcolm, in a low voice. 'Ye'll be gaun to stop at hame for a while now?'

'For a month, Malky; but I must away over to Rob's. I see a lot o' them at the smith's. Is Donald really going away?'

'Ay; and there's a man frae Findowie comin' up to the smiddy.'

'Malky, if the Laird had been quite well, these things would not be,' said Fergus soberly. 'I believe the factor does things in my uncle's name which he never sanctioned.'

'We ken that, but we'll be waur some day,' said Malky

quietly, as he went back to his work. Fergus crossed over the burn and passed by Jenny's door, meaning to look in and see Katie last of all. As he neared the smiddy door, he heard a loud burst of laughter, which did not seem to indicate much heaviness of heart. It was Ewan M'Fadyen, holding forth as usual in his solemn, bombastic style, to the great amusement of the others. Mary Macalpine, the smith's wife, looking out of the door, caught sight of Fergus.

'Here's the young Laird,' she cried, for by that title was the laddie now known in the Fauld.

'Well, how are you all? Mary, you are looking splendid!' cried Fergus, stepping across the smiddy doorstep, when he was immediately surrounded by Donald and all the rest, eager to shake him by the hand.

'What were you all laughing at?' asked Fergus, when he could get breath to speak. 'I thought you'd be all in very bad spirits.'

'Nay, for we are now free from the hand of the oppressor,' said Ewan solemnly; but the tear stood in Mary Macalpine's eye.

'Tell Maister Fergus about Rory Maclean bein' shot in the Sma' Glen, Ewan,' said young Rob Stewart, whose father had been in Turrich.

'Tell it yourself, Rob, or you, Donald,' said Fergus to the smith. 'If Ewan begins, dear knows where he'll end. Who shot Rory?'

'Ay, that's it—wha shot Rory?' replied the smith, his sides shaking with laughter. 'He was comin' thro' the sma' glen frae Crieff the ither nicht wi' his cairt. He had a bottle o' barm in his oxter, an' the heat o' his arm garred the cork flee oot wi' a lood report. It was a dark nicht, an' Rory, a muckle saft chield, as ye ken, Maister Fergus, thoct the deil was efter him, or that somebody had killed him deid wi' a gunshot. So he left the beast staunin' i' the glen, an' gaed aff on his hale legs to the shepherd's hoose at the Brig o' Newton, an' gied them a terrible fright. He said he was mortally hurt, an' began to tell them hoo his gear was to be pairted. But the shepherd, seein' the barm rinnin' ower his leg, says, "The bluid's unco white,

Rory." But it was lang or Rory was convinced he wasna killed.'

'That's a queer story, Donald,' said Fergus, laughing; 'but I'm glad ye've got something to laugh at. It seems serious enough to me that you are all going away from the Fauld.'

'We've got the warst brunt ower noo, lad,' said the smith.

'That we havena, smith,' put in Ewan. 'For we have yet to plough the unknown tracts of the vasty deep, and that'll be very severe upon the equilibrium, to say nothing about our stomachs.'

'When do you go away from the Glen?' asked Fergus, paying no attention to Ewan. In serious moments, when he wanted information, he was sometimes impatient of the precentor's long-winded sentences.

'No' the morn, but on Wednesday mornin', Maister Fergus,' said the smith, 'we'll gang oot o' the Glen—four-an' twenty souls o' us, an' a heap o' gear. We're no pretendin' we're gaun oot beggars, Maister Fergus. We are only gaun so that we'll no' be beggars. Could we hae made a leevin' ava, we wad hae bidden i' the Glen. Look at Mary there, she'll hae her een grutten oot or ever they see the last o' Glenquaich.'

The smith's voice faltered too, and a silence fell upon the little company. Strong, resolute men though they were, it was no light thing for them to turn their backs on their 'bairn's-hame,' which is ever the dearest we know.

'It's just awful to think you are going away from the Fauld,' said Fergus hurriedly. 'I—I wish I was the Laird; things would be different.'

'Ay, we ken that; but ye hae gotten a lesson, Maister Fergus, an' if ye ever come to your ain, ye'll ken to live an' let live, an' no' treat folks as if they were waur than brute beasts with ut sense,' said the smith. 'When ye see the auld Laird, Maister Fergus, tell him we gaed oot no' blamin' him, for when he was in his health things werena ill wi' us; but tell him we left a curse on that black deil at Auchloy, an' that Dalmore'll never prosper or he gets the road.'

A shadow darkened the doorway, a face looked in, with a mocking smile. The factor himself, sneaking about to overhear

chance remarks, had got the listener's portion, though not for the first time in Achnafauld.

Fergus ran out, but the factor was not to be seen. Then he crossed the road, lifted the sneck of Rob's door, and went in.

'Are ye there, Rob?'

'Ay, lad, I'm here; ye are welcome as the sun in hairst. Come in; though I'm not able to meet ye at the door.'

Fergus pushed open the door of the little kitchen, and there was Rob sitting at the fire, with the deal table before him covered with bits of paper, while he had an old copybook before him and a pen behind his ear.

'Are you making poetry, Rob? I'll disturb you.'

'Never mind. Sit down, lad; blithe am I to see your face.'

'I'm glad to see you, too, Rob, but I'm not able to bear the folks going away. It's a terrible, terrible shame!'

The lad threw himself into a cha'r, and one dry, quick sob broke from his lips. A peculiar kindness gleamed in the dark eye of the stocking-weaver as it rested on the boy's bent head.

'Ay, lad, this is but the beginnin' o' the desolation of which I spoke to you before,' he said. 'There's nobody coming to fill the places of them that's going away, save the sniddy, so you can imagine what like the place will be—a rickle o' empty booses where the beasts o' the field can shelter, but where human foot doesna enter. I'm no' tired o' life, Fergus Macleod, but I have no desire to live to see the complete doonfa' o' Achnafauld.'

'What's to become of the land, then, Rob?'

'Ye need hardly ask. The big feck o't gangs in wi' Auchloy,' said Rob, dropping his more poetical language, and speaking sharply to the point. 'Then Turrich and Little Turrich are let thegither wi' some o' the crofts at Kinloch. But I jalouse Angus McBean is waitin' or the folk be safely awa or he shows his haund.'

'It's a sad business. It just makes me miserable,' said Fergus, rising wearily. 'I must go home, for I promised to my mother not to stay long. I'll be along to-morrow, Rob. Good-bye just now.'

'Mr. Fergus,' said the stocking-weaver, 'I dinna want to push my nose into the affairs o' my betters, but they say the

ould Laird's a deein' man, an' I wad but advise ye to try an' look efter yer ain. I ken yer pride, my lad, but there's whiles we hae to pit doon a firm foot on pride to dae what's richt. Gang you up to Dalmore, an' see what's what, an' see there's nae writin' dune up there that shouldna be. Angus McBean's never oot o' Dalmore, an' there'll maybe be mair come o'd than you or yours wad like.'

'Everything's all wrong, Rob,' said Fergus hopelessly, shaking his head as he went out by the door. His face brightened a little at sight of Katie, bonnie and winsome as of yore, filling the water-pitchers at the well, and when he went up to her he had even a light, jesting word to greet her. Katie was glad and pleased to see him. She was grateful to him for his kind way with Malcolm, who had so few friends.

They stood but a few minutes, talking, of course, about the one absorbing subject of interest in the clachan; then, bidding her good-night, and refusing her invitation to come in and see her aunt, he turned up the path to the road which skirted the south side of the loch. Just at the turn he met young Angus, with his hands in his pockets, puffing away at a cigar, with all the airs of a foolish boy who thought himself a man. To be sure, Angus was now in his twentieth year, and so, perhaps, was justified in thinking himself quite grown-up. But he had no more than a boy's sense.

'Hulloa, Fergus, you know where the village belles are to be found,' he said offensively. 'Quite a picture, 'pon my word. Jacob at the well sort of thing.'

'Puddin', you are a perfect idiot,' said Fergus hotly. The very idea of such a thing in connection with Katie Menzies was too absurd.

'Oh, of course, a fellow always is when he tramps on another fellow's toes. I must be down to see the sweet Katie; a pretty girl, 'pon honour. She is a regular rustic beauty. Ah, that'll put up your monkey. You have a sneaking after her, then? Ha, ha!'

Fergus was so mad, he could willingly have knocked the stupid fellow down, but, reflecting that it was only Puddin' McBean, he only gave his lips a kind of haughty curl, which

somehow made Angus redden. It seemed to measure a distance between them. Fergus actually looked at him as if he were beneath contempt. Before he could say anything, Fergus had passed on, and was walking with a long, striding step up the road.

He was quite out of sorts. Everything seemed to conspire to vex him. Even Puddin's stupid jeering had left a ranking sting. He walked on until he had passed the swelling moors which hid Dalmore, and he could see its lights gleaming through the darkening night. Thoughts seemed to lie upon him then like a great flood—Dalmore at the mercy of aliens and servants; even Sheila, who might have been its guardian angel, was far away in a London school; and in that lonely house his uncle was left to die, without a loving hand, or the smile of kith or kin about his bed. That was of far greater moment to Fergus Macleod than the dividing of the estate. It seemed, indeed, more than he could bear.



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CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAST MEETING.

Waking the memories that sleep
In the heart's silence long and deep.



MACDONALD of Dalmore was confined to his bed now for the greater part of the day. If he had a specific disease, the doctors did not name it, but, though he suffered great weakness of body, his mental faculties were unclouded. He knew everything that was going on on his estates, at least, in so far as Angus McBean kept him acquainted with it. There were some things, of course, which that wily individual kept to himself. The letter which Fergus Macleod had written to Rob Macnaughton had been duly discussed in the library at Dalmore. Ewan McFadyen, who could keep nothing to himself, had taken care to acquaint the factor with its contents, particularly with the bit referring to him. When it was turned over again, with the factor's own suitable embellishments, it had assumed the form of a tirade against the Laird himself. So Macdonald was more angered than usual against his nephew. That same evening he came home, and, after passing by the smiddy, where he saw Fergus, the factor betook himself up the Corrymuckloch road to Dalmore. He was such a constant visitor there, that his comings and goings were scarcely noticed. He generally entered without seeking admittance, and made his own way to

the library, or wherever the Laird happened to be. There was nobody to challenge him but Tory, which he usually did with many a bark and snarl, for the animal hated him. Just as the factor was walking across the hall that evening, Maggie Macintosh, the maid, came up from the kitchen.

‘Well, Maggie,’ he said familiarly, ‘anything new?’

‘No’ much; but Colquhoun, the writer, was here the day, and he’s to be back on Saturday,’ she said hurriedly. ‘I thocht ye wad like to ken.’

‘Of course, of course. I’ll see you again, Maggie,’ said the factor carelessly. ‘The Laird’s up the night?’

‘No, sir; he’s in his bed.’

‘All right, I’ll just go in; thank you, Maggie,’ he said, and turned the handle of the library door.

Macdonald was sitting up in his bed, a poor, thin, wasted shadow, with his grey hairs straggling about his brow, and his keen, deep-set eyes peering out with a peculiar brilliancy which struck even Angus M’Bean. The Laird was certainly worse.

‘Good evening, Angus; sit down,’ said the Laird, in his usual quiet, rather listless voice. ‘Anything fresh?’

‘Not much, sir. Mr. Fergus Macleod returned to Shonnen to night.’

‘Ay, you told me he was coming. He’ll be in a terrible way about this exodus from the Fauld.’

‘Yes; he’s down among them holding a council of war in the smiddy,’ said the factor, with a hard laugh. ‘I was passing by and overheard some of their sayings. I think he was urging them not to hurry, for things would soon be different.’

‘Ay; what did he mean?’ asked the Laird.

‘He meant, and, indeed, said that when he was Laird things would be different. The ungrateful young rascal, that I should say it of him; but it roused my anger, Laird, after what you did for him in the past.’

‘So the lad, young as he is, is waiting on dead men’s shoes already?’ said the Laird grimly. ‘Tell him from me, if ye like, Angus, that a wise henwife doesna count her chickens before they are hatched.’

‘I wouldna like to take it upon myself to tell him that,

Laird. Of course he is the direct heir; but I hope he'll be an old man before he writes himself Laird of Dalmore,' said the factor smoothly. He was gasping to know the wherefore of David Colquhoun the writer's visit to Dalmore, but had not the face to ask the question directly at the Laird.

'And they are going away when? upon Wednesday morning, sir, the poor silly bodies?' asked Macdonald. 'Do they think they'll get land and a living for nothing in another country any more than in Glenquaiach?'

'They certainly expect that, sir; that's why they are going.'

'Well, well, let them go. They are not going empty-handed from the place, ye were saying?'

'Not they. I wish ye saw the kists upon kists of linen and beer knows what packed in the houses. They've strippet the Glen, Laird, an' yet they're countin' themselves ill-used.'

'Well, well, I don't grudge them their gear; they'll maybe need it all,' said the Laird, and his restless eyes wandered about the room as if seeking for something. 'So the lad's come home? Bid him come up, Angus, when ye see him. I wouldna mind a word with him again, though he does think me a Tartar. He's a lad of spirit, Fergus Macleod. Ye canna deny that, Angus?'

'If ye call it spirit,' said the factor rather sourly, 'he has helped to turn the folk against Dalmore, that's certain, for I've heard him with my own ears.'

'Well, well, he's honest at any rate. Ye had better leave me, Angus. I am tired to-night, and cannot be troubled with any more talk.'

'Have ye been thinking much about business to-day, sir?' the factor asked, as he rose to his feet, loth to go till he could carry something definite with him.

'Not more than usual. Good-night. Mind and tell Fergus to come up,' said the Laird, and turned his face to the wall. So there was nothing for Angus McBean but to go, which he did, reluctantly enough. He would have given a great deal to learn what was Mr. Colquhoun's errand to Dalmore. As he went out, Mrs. Cameron, the housekeeper, went into the Laird's room. She was constant and faithful in her attendance upon

him for the sake of her mistress, whose memory she worshipped still.

‘Is that you, Cameron?’

‘Ay, sir, it’s me.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Twenty minutes from nine, sir.’

‘It’s too late to-night, then. The first thing in the morning, bid Lachlan yoke the pair in the carriage, and go over to Murrayshaugh for Lady Ailsa.’

‘Lady Ailsa, sir! Are ye worse the night?’

‘Maybe. I want Lady Ailsa to come and bide here, Cameron. She will not refuse me. She was here seven years ago biding when August comes. Ye can send what message ye like to Murrayshaugh, but she’ll understand.’

‘Sir, would you like to see Miss Sheila?’ asked the housekeeper.

‘Ay, that’s what I want. Lady Ailsa will arrange about it. I want no strangers about Dalmore, Cameron, only Lady Ailsa and my bairn. And when Angus M’Bean comes to the door again, see that he doesna get in or I give leave. He comes in here as if the place were his own.’

The latter order gave Mrs. Cameron the most lively satisfaction. She did not at all approve of Angus M’Bean. She knew quite well what all these orders portended; indeed, she could see that the Laird was drawing near his end. She was right glad to think that it was to Lady Ailsa he turned once more in his hour of need, for she was a good woman and a true friend. Angus M’Bean had left the hall door open, and the night wind was blowing coldly in. So Cameron crossed over to shut it before she went down-stairs. She got a fright by seeing a figure on the doorstep, just within the shadow of the porch.

‘It’s you, Mr. Fergus. Bless me, what a fright you gave me! Come in, come in.’

‘I don’t think I can come in. I was coming up by Corry-mæckloch, and I thought I would just run up and ask for my uncle, Mrs. Cameron. Tell me just how he is?’

‘That I will. Come in, Mr. Fergus, just into the gunroom, no farther,’ said the housekeeper, who loved the boy, and had

never forgotten his demeanour that day he came to Dalmore when his uncle's wife died. 'Did ye meet Mr. M'Bean? He's just this minute gone.'

'I saw him, but he didn't see me. I came up the footpath, and was at the stable corner when he went down the avenue,' Fergus answered, as he followed the housekeeper into the gun-room, which was now never used. It had been Fergus Macleod's favourite haunt in the old days, when nothing had come between himself and Uncle Graham.

'The Laird's far through, Mr. Fergus,' said the housekeeper sadly. 'He was just giving me orders to send to Murrayshaugh for Lady Ailsa. Miss Sheila will be coming home immediately, likely.'

'Is my uncle dying, Mrs. Cameron?' asked Fergus, in a painful whisper, for she had given him an unexpected shock.

'I fear it, Mr. Fergus. I cannot think he will last many days.'

'Could—oh, do you think he would see me, Mrs. Cameron? I cannot bear to think I may never see him again.'

'I'll ask him. I'm sure he will see you. Eh, laddie, had ye been aye at Dalmore, I believe this would never have happened,' she said, as she went out of the room, and once more returned to the Laird's chamber.

'Are ye sleeping, sir?' she asked.

'No; what now?' asked Macdonald rather peevishly.

'There's somebody come to ask for ye, sir, and would fain see ye,' she said, bending over him.

'Ay; who's that?'

'Mr. Fergus, from Shonnen.'

'Bid him come in, and turn up the lamp,' said the Laird quickly. 'Give me a mouthful of the wine before he comes in. Ay, that'll do.'

Fergus had scarcely any hope that his uncle would see him, and was surprised when Mrs. Cameron brought him the friendly message.

He entered the sick-room with his cap in his hand, half shyly, half eagerly, as if not knowing exactly how to comport himself. There was a barrier now between him and the uncle

who had been the hero and friend of his childish days. He was greatly shocked by his uncle's changed appearance. It was only six months since he had seen him before, but in that time a marked change had been wrought.

'Well, lad, have ye come to see the old man again? We'll not be here very long now,' said Macdonald, with a grim smile. 'Ye are a big, buirdly chield. Sit ye down, sit ye down.'

Fergus took the wasted hand of his uncle between his two strong palms and pressed it, but was unable to speak. Graham Macdonald saw what was in the boy's heart, for it spoke in his earnest eye, and he wondered that he had believed aught ill of him.

'Sit ye down, sit ye down,' he said quickly, once more. 'So ye've gotten home? not a whit the wiser for your college lore, I'll be bound.'

'Ay, Uncle Graham, I've learned something,' answered Fergus, with a gleam of his own bright smile. 'I've learned what like a town's life is, and to be glad that I'm a Highland-man.'

'Well, that's something. Did ye meet our gentleman factor out by as ye came up?' asked Graham Macdonald, with a curious, dry smile.

'I saw him, Uncle Graham, but he didn't see me,' Fergus answered quietly.

'That was maybe as well. He wouldna be sair pleased to see you at Dalmore. Well, lad, he's made a clearance of the Fauld. He says it'll be better for Dalmore, but I'll no' live to see whether he be a true prophet. They have given me a fell amount of bother this while, Fergus. They think I'm a hard laird, but they are waur tenants. They have served me ill, Fergus.'

'Uncle Graham,'—in his great earnestness Fergus laid his young, strong hand on his uncle's arm,—'you don't know the right way. I can't help it if you are angry. Angus M'B has not told you the truth about the Fauld folks. They tried to do well, but he would not let them; he has just turned them out, Uncle Graham. At least, he made it impossible for them to live with any comfort in the place, and they were obliged to leave before they lost everything.'

'Ye are at all,' said speech.

'I can't Fauld folk only get u down seein Donald M'

'No; w terribly laz sey?'

'He said for they w own affairs. not knowin Donald's m Angus M'B

'Ay, ay, mirthless la and Auchlo Fergus, ye Dalmore?'

'No, Unc well.'

'That'll r Macleod, w Marry youn mind owre was, it's dea grudge or a

'Uncle G an earnestne

'Lad, ye a chance. who was to

'Tell me, do

'Agree!

'Well, ye

'Ye are a perfect Radical, laddie. Ye'll no' uphold the lairds at all,' said Macdonald, not ill-pleased with his nephew's bold speech.

'I can't uphold what's wrong, Uncle Graham; and I say the Fauld folks have not been rightly treated. Oh, if you could only get up and go down to see for yourself! I have been down seeing them all to-night, and do you know what message Donald McGlashan sent up to you?'

'No; what was it? An honest chap, the smith, but lazy, terribly lazy. Wants to eat for nothing. But what did he say?'

'He said I was to tell you they went out not blaming you, for they were quite comfortable when you looked after your own affairs. He said, too,' added the lad, a little hesitatingly, not knowing how his uncle might receive the latter part of Donald's message, 'that a curse would lie on Dalmore till Angus M'Bean was put away.'

'Ay, ay, and he said that?' said the Laird, with a hollow, mirthless laugh. 'There's no love lost betwixt the Fauld folk and Auchloy. Well, well, Donald may be no' far wrang. Well, Fergus, ye see me far through. And are you to be Laird of Dalmore?'

'No, Uncle Graham—I don't know. I wish you would get well.'

'That'll never be,' said the Laird, in a low voice. 'Fergus Macleod, whatever your lot may be, lay one thing to heart. Marry young, lad, for if ye wait as long as I waited, ye set your mind owre firmly on your wife, and if she be taken as mine was, it's death to you. Fergus, I believe ye never bore me a grudge or an ill-will because I married.'

'Uncle Graham, I loved her,' said the boy simply, but with an earnestness inexpressibly touching.

'Lad, ye can teach your elders a lesson, yet ye havena had a chance. But ye are the son of the minister of Meiklemore, who was too good for this world,' said the Laird musingly.

'Tell me, do you an' your mother agree?'

'Agree! of course.'

'Well, ye are the first Ellen Macleod has ever 'greed with,'

said the Laird grimly. 'You and Sheila used to be thick, didn't ye? The bairn had aye a great speakin' about ye.'

Fergus smiled somewhat bashfully, being just at the sensitive age. The Laird smiled too, very faintly, at the rising colour in the lad's face. A new and pleasant thought had struck him, but he did not put it into words.

'And what's all this college lore to do for you, Fergus?' he asked. 'What are ye to do for a living?'

'I don't know yet, Uncle Graham. I wanted to go and work when I came from Perth, but mother wanted me to go to college.'

'Ay, her notions are high,' said the Laird dryly. 'Nevertheless, ye must obey your mother, I suppose. A chap like you will never want, Fergus Macleod. Ye will make a name and a place for yourself wherever ye be.'

Fergus Macleod's face flushed with pride and pleasure at his uncle's praise. He still retained his old admiration for the Laird, and his commendation meant a great deal.

'I'll not be afraid to work, at any rate, uncle, I'm so strong.'

'Ay, ye look it. But what would ye like best to do?'

'Farm land,' responded Fergus promptly. 'I won't work at anything that'll take me to the town.'

'Ay, ay. Well, well. Ye may get your heart's desire, and ye may no'. I'm tired, Fergus, and maun bid ye good-night. Come up the morn and see me. You've fairly turned your back on Dalmore.'

'But no' my face, Uncle Graham; for it's the first place I look over to when I'm at Shonnen, and the last at night,' said Fergus, laughing, as he rose to his feet. He had not felt so lappy for a long time. Confidence seemed to be restored between himself and Uncle Graham.

'Good-night, then. Bid Mistress Cameron come to me as you go down. Ay, ay, ye are a buirdly chield. In five years there'll not be your marrow in Glenquaich or Strathbraan. An' she's a sweet bairn. Good-night. Come again the morn,' said Macdonald somewhat drowsily; and when Fergus left him he closed his eyes, but muttered half under his breath, 'Ay, ay, a buirdly chield, and she's a bonnie bairn. It wad make a richt for Dalmore.'

Often Macdonald lapsed into the broad Scotch, especially in moments of strong feeling. When Mrs. Cameron came into the room, she was surprised to see two large tears slowly rolling down the Laird's cheeks. 'Is that you, Cameron?' he said, sitting up with sudden energy. 'Bring me from the library the writing-pad and a broad sheet of paper, with pen and ink, and set the lamp here on this table.'

The housekeeper opened the library door and brought the required articles, then propped up the Laird among his pillows to make a comfortable position for writing. She was not without a natural curiosity as to what he was going to do; he did not often now have a pen in his hand.

'That'll do, Cameron. Is the hand-bell near? I'll ring it when I want ye,' said the Laird, so she was obliged to withdraw.

It was quite half an hour before the bell rang, but when she returned there were no signs of any written papers to be seen. He bade her take away the things, and as she did so she observed that a half of the sheet she had provided was gone, and that the ink was still wet on the pen the Laird had used.





CHAPTER XX.

AN UNWELCOME INTRUDER.

I will speak daggers to her.

Hamlet.



HOSE carriage is that away up to Dalmore, I wonder?' said Ellen Macleod half aloud, as she was standing at her bedroom window on the upper flat at Shonnen next morning.

'It's the carriage that went for Lady Ailsa, ma'am,' said Jessie Mackenzie, the maid, who was busy dusting the room.

'Lady Ailsa! Has she come to Dalmore?'

'Yes, ma'am. They told me at the inn this morning, when I was over for the milk, that the Laird was worse, and had sent for Lady Ailsa.'

Ellen Macleod bit her lips. 'Scarcely before a servant could she keep back the utterance of her angry thought.

'Get on with your dusting there, Jessie, and be sharp about it. Do you know it is twelve o'clock in the day?' she said sharply, as she quitted the room and went hastily down-stairs. Fergus was sitting on the doorstep carefully examining his fishing-tackle, for it was a mild, bright morning, and the burns were in splendid order.

'Fergus, did your uncle tell you last night he had sent for Lady Ailsa?' she asked sharply.

'No, mother; he didn't say anything about her.'

‘Well, there she is away up. He is worse this morning, Jessie says, and I am not called. But I’ll go, Fergus Macleod, in spite of Ailsa Murray. I have a right in Dalmore which she has not.’

Fergus dropped his rod and looked up into his mother’s face with a strange, sad, perplexed expression. There was a hidden bitterness, a terrible depth of revengeful, angry feeling in the short, sharp words she uttered. But he had no right to speak, nor to say what she should do, so he turned to his work again with a sigh. And Ellen Macleod, in the heat of her anger, put on her bonnet and marched away up to Dalmore. Lady Ailsa was eating a morsel of lunch in the dining-room when the gaunt black figure of Ellen Macleod stalked in before her. Lady Ailsa saw the thunder on her brow, but was absolutely mistress of the occasion. She was a gentle little woman, but not timid in matters of right or wrong, and could be very brave when she had the approval of her own conscience. She had done no wrong to Ellen Macleod or her boy, and had no occasion to fear her.

‘Good morning, Ellen,’ she said quietly, and without offering to rise or shake hands, for she could *not* forget the last time they had met. ‘It is a long drive from Murrayshaugh. I am quite hungry. Won’t you sit down?’

‘If I please, I suppose I may, in my brother’s house, Lady Ailsa,’ said Ellen Macleod icily. ‘I shall just go up and lay aside my bonnet. As my brother is so ill, I shall just stay.’

So saying, she marched out of the room. When the door closed a smile of amusement rippled across Lady Ailsa’s face, but it soon passed, and she looked perplexed.

‘That is what in Alastair’s slang would be called a “go,” she said to herself. ‘Now, what am I to do? Ellen Macleod as good as told me to quit. But am I to leave poor Macdonald to her tender mercies? She’ll frighten him into a fit; and then there’s Sheila, poor darling; she’ll be home in two days. No, I must stay, now I am here, whatever the consequences.’ But her lunch was spoiled. Her appetite had vanished at sight of Ellen Macleod’s sour visage, and she sat with her elbows on the table, wondering greatly what was going on up-stairs.



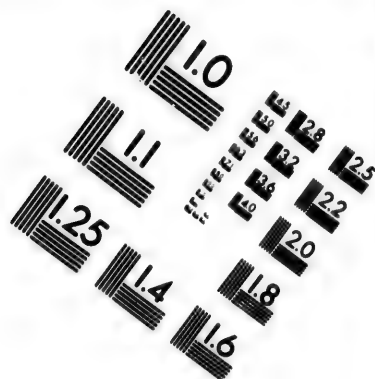
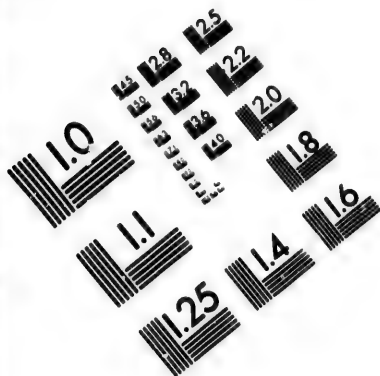
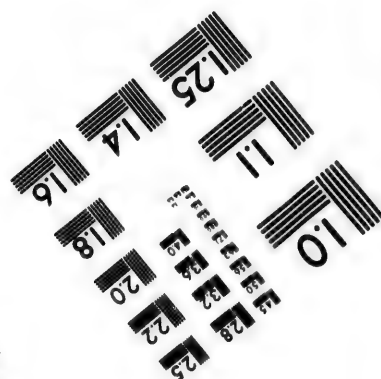
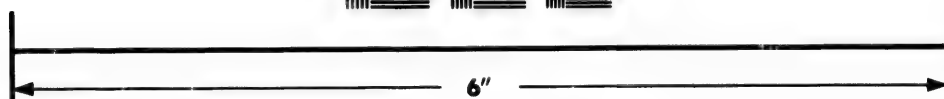
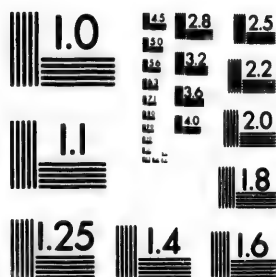


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Ellen Macleod walked up-stairs, entered one of the guest-chambers, and laid off her bonnet and shawl. Her hard face was very resolute. She knew she had a battle to fight, but she was armed for it, and intended to win. She was not going to stand by and see her son's heritage parted among aliens without making an effort to save it. As she came out of the room, Mrs. Cameron met her, and started as if she had seen a ghost.

'Don't look so scared, Cameron,' said Ellen Macleod, with a chilly smile. 'I have come to nurse my brother. He has moved from his old rooms, I see. Where is he?'

'In the little parlour off the library, ma'am,' said Cameron, civilly enough, but her heart sank within her. She had never personally experienced Mrs. Macleod's rule, for there was no housekeeper in Dalmore in *her* day, but she had heard sufficient about her to make her dread her coming to the house.

She watched her go down and enter the library. When the door closed, Cameron rushed down to the drawing-room with a pile of household napery on her arm.

'Oh, Lady Ailsa,' she cried, almost before she was in the room, 'do you know who has come? Mrs. Macleod from Shonnen, and she's away in to the Laird.'

'Hush, Cameron! never mind. Mrs. Macleod is the Laird's sister,' said Lady Ailsa quietly. 'We cannot question her right to see him if she wishes. I wish you would order a fire for me in my own room. It is much colder here than at Murrays-haugh.'

'O yes, my lady, I'll do that; and you'll stay? You won't go away and leave me with Mrs. Macleod?'

'I must stay until Miss Macdonald comes now, at any rate, Cameron,' said Lady Ailsa, with a slight smile.

'The Laird was asking a little ago if you were ready to see him, my lady. Will you go in?'

'Not until Mrs. Macleod comes out,' said Lady Ailsa. 'When she sees how spent he is, she surely will not stay long.'

Meanwhile, Ellen Macleod had passed through the library and entered her brother's sick-room. It was much darkened; for he had passed a restless, troubled night, and in the morning had begged them to shut in the windows, and he would try to

sleep. He was awakened from a light doze by the heavy rustling of a woman's dress in the room.

'Is that you, Ailsa?' he asked feebly. 'Come in; never mind the windows; we can talk quite well in the dark. I have a lot to say to you. I am so glad you have come.'

'Lady Ailsa is in the house, Macdonald; but I am your sister, Ellen Macleod, come over from Shonnen to see you. I am grieved to see you so changed.'

She spoke with unwonted softness, for she was terribly shocked by the ravages the wasted years had made on the once stalwart Laird of Dalmore. But the very sound of her voice roused the dying man into a passion terrible to see. In his long solitude he had brooded over the past, and magnified the unkind treatment his sister had bestowed upon his wife, until it had become a mortal offence which he would not forgive even on the verge of the grave.

'You—you dare!' he cried, in a choking voice. 'Get out of my sight! I would not curse you for the boy's sake, though I know not how you ever bore such a son. Leave me, woman, or—'

The violence of his anger, the purple flush in his face, the wildness of his eye, frightened Ellen Macleod, and she beat a hasty retreat into the adjoining room. Then Macdonald took the hand-bell and shook it with tremendous force, which made Mrs. Cameron drop her napery on the hall floor and run to the room.

'What are you about, Cameron, that you allow whoever pleases to enter the house and come to my room?' he thundered, with something of his old strength and vigour. 'Lock the doors, and let no one come in until I give permission.'

'Sir, I dared not keep Mrs. Macleod out,' said Cameron, trembling, not with nervousness for herself, but with apprehension for her master, who was nearly in a fit.

'Why not? Where is Lady Ailsa? Send her here. What is she good for if not to keep the house in order? Tell her to see that Mrs. Macleod leaves the house.'

Pleasant words for a sister to hear! Ellen Macleod, standing by the library table, clutched her hands, and her white lips

became like a thread. She was wholly and cruelly injured in her own eyes. She was one of those self-righteous persons who never take home blame to themselves. She regarded Macdonald as the prey of self-seeking, greedy outsiders, who had turned him against his own. Her heart was a tumult of dark thoughts, unrelieved by a single kindly impulse. Her face hardened yet more. She gathered her skirts in her hand, and went out by the way she had come. At the dining-room door Lady Ailsa was standing listening, afraid lest Ellen Macleod's visit had done the Laird some harm.

'For some extraordinary reason, Lady Ailsa, my presence is not agreeable to my brother,' she said, with a dark scowl. 'Perhaps you, who are such a privileged person in Dalmore, can explain it?'

'Yes, I can explain it, Ellen Macleod,' said Lady Ailsa quietly, but with emphasis. 'I pass over the insinuation you make against me, and will only ask you to go back in memory six years ago. Did you do one act of kindness or even of justice to the dear woman your brother married? Do you remember after her death what sympathy you had for her orphan child? You and I met last in this very hall, Ellen Macleod, and Macdonald saw how you greeted the poor child, whose desolate condition might have appealed to your heart. Macdonald has not forgotten these things, nor have I.'

'Nor have I,' said Ellen Macleod, in the heat of passion. 'I know well enough what you are scheming for, Ailsa Murray. But I shall watch you. If I can help it, that woman's child shall never reign in Dalmore.'

'Were it not that she found a father in Graham Macdonald, and that her heart cleaves to him, I should say it was a dark day for her when she crossed the threshold of Dalmore,' said Lady Ailsa sadly. 'I ask no more from Macdonald but that he will give Sheila back to those who love her. The more needful she is of anything we have to share with her, the more welcome she will be to it, and she knows it. If I have one wish in this world, Ellen Macleod, it is that, after Sheila parts from her father,—and that parting, I fear, is near at hand,—she may have

no more dealings with this house or with any bearing its name.'

A sneering smile, which stung Lady Ailsa to the quick, was Ellen Macleod's only reply to that passionate speech. At that moment, Cameron, trembling and anxious, appeared at the library door.

'Oh, my lady, please come in. The Laird will not be quiet till you come. He is much worse,' she said, with an expressive glance at Mrs. Macleod, who instantly entered the dining-room and slammed the door.

Lady Ailsa at once went to the Laird's room, and, sitting down by the bed, laid her cool, soft hand on his fevered brow. She was an angel in a sick-room: her every movement, the soft swaying of her garments even, seemed to waft peace to the sufferer blessed by her presence.

'Not a word, Macdonald, not one until you are quiet,' she said, with that sweet authority it was a delight to obey.

'Yes, yes,' she added soothingly, 'she is gone. She will not come here again, and I am going to stay till Sheila comes.'

He lay back among his pillows, contented by her presence and by the assurance she so readily gave. In the brief silence which ensued, she too noticed the change wrought since she saw him last a few weeks after Sheila left Dalmore. He was still labouring under the excitement his sister had caused, his breathing was hurried and difficult, and his eyes rolling restlessly, while his hands and head were in a burning fever.

'You'll stay and take care of Sheila?' he said at length, in a hurried whisper.

'Yes, yes; Sheila belongs to us. She will be your legacy to me, will she not?' asked Lady Ailsa, with a faint, sad smile.

He nodded.

'Her mother would wish it, but she was not afraid to leave her with me. Do you remember when you wanted to take her away to Murrayshaugh, but the bairn would rather bide with me,' said Macdonald, smiling a little too. He was much quieter already, and Lady Ailsa believed it would be better to allow him to talk a little, provided dangerous topics were avoided.

'Yes, I remember. Ay, Sheila loves you with a daughter's love. This will be a sore shock to her.'

'You have sent for her?'

'Yes, Sir Douglas himself has gone for her. He has some business which made the journey not unprofitable.'

'How soon will she be here?'

'To-morrow, perhaps in the evening, if there is no delay.'

'Ay, ay; nobody knows what it was to me to let her away; but I did not want to be selfish.'

'If I could have foreseen this, Macdonald, I would have been the last to have advocated sending her from you. I did it for the best.'

'I know that you are a good woman and a true friend, Ailsa Murray. *She* said so. You'll see that I am laid in the same grave. Promise that.'

'Yes, yes.'

Lady Ailsa's tears choked her utterance. There was something indescribably pathetic in the man's intense, undying devotion to the memory of his wife. He had indeed loved not wisely but too well.

'I know now, looking back, that I have done but sorry duty in the world since she left me,' he said, after a moment. 'If I had it to do again, I would try to bestir myself. But it was so sudden, so awful, it took the heart clean out of me. They will not punish me, will they, by parting us in the other world?'

'Who are *they*, Macdonald? God is very merciful, far more merciful to us, in spite of our shortcomings, than we are to each other,' said Lady Ailsa reverently. 'He forgives unto seventy times seven.'

'He will forgive me, then,' said Macdonald, in a strange, drowsy tone. 'It'll be all right about Sheila, Ailsa. Nobody can touch her.'

'Macdonald, I hope you have not forgotten your own,' said Lady Ailsa quickly, for a dread seized her that the Laird's faculties were wandering. 'Don't let your love for Sheila make you unjust to others. I hope that fine lad, Fergus Macleod, will fill your place as worthily as Laird of Dalmore.'

Macdonald muttered a few words she could not make out,

and then, turning on his pillow, closed his eyes. He lay so still she feared he had slipped away, but when she laid her hand on his heart, it was still feebly pulsing.

From that hour a weight lay upon Lady Ailsa's heart. She hoped, nay, the hope was almost a passionate prayer, that, in his anger and sore pain against his sister, Macdonald had not visited the mother's sin upon the head of her noble, generous-hearted son, and cut him off from Dalmore.





CHAPTER XXI.

'FAREWELL TO LOCHABER.'

There's a track upon the deep, and a path across the sea ;
But the weary ne'er return to their ain countrie.

GILFILLAN.

THE day wore on, and Fergus waited at Shonnen for his mother's return. When it grew grey dark, he put on his cap and sauntered away up by Amulree, to see if she was in sight on the road. The inn was very busy, for the folks had gathered in at the gloaming to discuss the affairs of the place. There was plenty to talk about: the departure of the Fauld folks, and the Laird's mortal illness, gave rise to that morbid speculation in which the soul of the village gossip delights. Fergus heard his own name as he passed by the open door, but only smiled a little and passed on. His interest was centred in Dalmore. What could be keeping his mother? What if a reconciliation has been effected between her and his uncle? The thought made his pulses tingle, for it opened up a new and beautiful vista. He saw his uncle restored to health, himself and his mother at home again in Dalmore, and Sheila with them. Ah, it was only a bright dream, never to be fulfilled. He passed on to the school, and sauntered along in the sweet spring dusk to the Girron Brig, and, after pausing for a few minutes to watch his old friends the trouts playing themselves in the cool, clear

little currents, he crossed over and began to climb the hill to the house. He seemed impelled to it without any active desire on his own part. There were green buds and tender young shoots on all the trees, and the birds, harbingers of summer, were twittering in every bough. The earth was full of promise—it was the spring-time of the year. As Fergus turned round the sharp curve of the avenue, he saw a figure walking to and fro before the house, and recognised Lady Ailsa Murray, though he had not seen her for years. When she turned she saw him, and came to meet him with a kind smile and out-stretched hand. She did not like Ellen Macleod, but she was too just a woman to allow this to prejudice her against the son.

'How are you, Fergus? I am so glad to see you. It is quite a long time since we met.'

'Yes; but you are just the same,' said Fergus quickly, and his eye shone, for the kind, sweet, motherly tone went to his heart.

'A little older, I think,' she said gently. 'You are grown almost out of all recognition. I have been anxious to see you for a long time. Alastair speaks so much about you.'

'Yes; Alastair is my chum.'

'I am glad of it. You will be able to come down to Murrayshaugh, I hope, before the holidays are over. You have come to ask for your uncle, I suppose?'

'Yes, and to see why my mother stays so long. Is she here, Lady Ailsa?'

'Yes.' A cloud crossed the sunshine on Lady Ailsa's face. 'If you go into the house you will see her. Your uncle is very ill, Fergus.'

'I know he is, Lady Ailsa,' answered the boy, and turned his face away.

'You saw him last night, I think, Mrs. Cameron said?'

'Yes.'

'Fergus,' said Lady Ailsa, and she laid her white, gentle hand on his arm, and bent her soft eyes full on his face, 'I am your true friend, my boy. You believe I wish you well?'

'I know it,' said Fergus, with boyish impulsiveness.

From the drawing-room window, Ellen Macleod saw the two

together, and wondered what was passing between them. Lady Ailsa's action, and the earnest, beautiful look on Fergus's upturned face, struck her. *She* had never called forth such a look on her son's face.

'I am growing very anxious about some things, Fergus,' continued Lady Ailsa. 'You know your uncle cannot live long now?'

Fergus nodded.

'I doubt there will be trouble about the parting of Dalmore. Do you think you are your uncle's heir?'

'I don't know, Lady Ailsa. There is Sheila,' said the lad, and his lip quivered. She was touching a very tender part.

'Fergus, I pray that Graham Macdonald has not done this wrong!' said Lady Ailsa passionately. 'Sheila has no right to Dalmore, and it would make a fearful dispeace. If it is done, there is nothing to remedy it now, unless there should be a miraculous betterment in your uncle's condition. Whatever happens, Fergus, you will know that neither Sheila nor her relatives had any desire after Graham Macdonald's possessions. It is my prayer that she will be restored to us penniless. We love her for herself.'

'But if Uncle Graham wished Sheila to have Dalmore, Lady Ailsa, we can't help it. I would rather Sheila had it than anybody. She is so good and kind to the people in Achnafauld.'

'God bless you, Fergus Macleod! I pray to see you Laird of Dalmore,' said Lady Ailsa, with full eyes, and, bending down, she kissed the boy's broad forehead with a mother's kiss; and Ellen Macleod saw her do it, and hated her yet more. Not content with all she had done, would she try to win the boy over, and make him a traitor to his race?

When Fergus went into the house, he found his mother in no amiable mood. Her self-chosen position was not enviable nor pleasant. She had forced herself into the house, and knew that it was only because its master believed her to be gone that there was peace in the sick-room. But she had set herself a task, and, with the indomitable will which ruled her, she would perform it to the bitter end.

'What is it now?' she asked Fergus, when he came into the

drawing-room. 'I saw you and Lady Ailsa talking quite confidentially. What was she saying to you?'

'Not much, mother. Are you going to stay here all night?'

'Yes. My place is here until your uncle's end comes. It will not be very long. But you must go back to Shonnen and take care of the house.'

'Have you seen Uncle Graham, mother?'

'Yes. His heart is completely poisoned against us, Fergus Macleod. These Murrays have worked their will with him. I doubt *you* will be the sufferer; but I will hold my peace until all is over, and the result known. There is no use for you waiting here.'

'No. I am going,' said Fergus, but still lingered, looking about the pretty quaint room, which was filled with sweet memories of Sheila and her mother.

'A bonnie gimerackery they've made of this room,' said Ellen Macleod grimly. 'If this is fashionable taste, preserve me from it! Good-night then, Fergus. If I am not down myself in the morning, send Jessie up with some things for me; she will know what to bring.'

So Fergus had just to go away back by the road he had come. He had no heart to go along to Achnaufauld, for he knew the folks would be sad enough in spirit over the parting from the only homes they had ever known. He went to bed early, leaving strict injunctions with Jessie Mackenzie to awake him at five o'clock. The carts were to leave the Fauld at six o'clock, to convey the folks down to Dunkeld station in time to get the first train. The ship in which they were to cross the ocean was to sail from the Broomielaw late that night, or before sunrise next morning. Never had fairer morning dawned than the second of April; the sunshine and the joyful chorus of the birds awoke Fergus, and he was up before Jessie was stirring down-stairs. When he pulled up the blind, the morning sun was glittering on the loch and lighting up the bonnie trees about Achnaufauld, as if to make the place look its loveliest for the eyes that were to look upon it for the last time. There was no sign of mourning anywhere: the sun was up, the sky brilliantly blue, save where the fleecy shafts relieved it:

and there was a soft west wind stirring all the young leaves, and whispering of the summer. It was almost impossible to be sad amid such light and sunshine, and Fergus felt glad for the exiles' sakes, knowing their hearts would be heavy enough without any depressing influences from without. From the high windows of the Lodge he could see right across the river to Achnafauld, and when the carts, five in number, set out in a long string from the clachan, he ran hurriedly down-stairs to awaken Jessie, and to get on his boots. He wanted to be down the road a bit before he had to bid them good-bye, for all the Amulree folks would be out, and he did not want them to hear anything he might say. He walked slowly, often looking back to see the little train gradually approaching Amulree. He could hear the distant strains of the pipes, and guessed that it was blind Rob playing a farewell blast for his friends and comrades, who were going to a land where the sound of the pibroch would never ring in their ears save in memory alone.

When out of sight, Fergus sat down on a heap of stones and began whittling a stick with his knife, to keep his fingers in occupation, for he was growing curiously nervous and excited. He had laid this thing to heart, and was convinced in his own mind that a grievous wrong had been done to the Fauld folks. It seemed a long time before the rumble of the carts sounded in the near distance. There were so many hand-shakings, and then a halt had to be made at the inn, where M'Dougall gave them a glass all round for auld acquaintance' sake. But on they came at last, and then Fergus got up to his feet, for his heart was full. In the first cart were Jamie Stewart and his ailing wife, wrapped in so many shawls that she looked like a mummy, but her pale face wore a contented look, as if she were glad to get away from the place. Her bairns were all with her, and by her side her daughter-in-law, young Rob's wife, who had looked forward to being mistress of Little Turrich. In the second cart, the smith's broad face shone red and rosy under his big Tam o' Shanter; but Mary's eyes were swollen and red, for she had bidden good-bye for ever to a wee grave in the kirkyard at Shian, where her first and last bairn slept.

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She had a root of heather from that little mound in her kist, and it was her hope and prayer that that root would take kindly to Canadian soil, and so make a bit of home for her in the strange land. Ewan McFadyen's soul had failed him at the last moment, so he was not of the number, but there was a goodly band,—five-and-twenty souls in all,—big brawny men, sonsy wives, and bonnie healthy-faced bairns, who would make a grand living for themselves under fair conditions anywhere. The gain would be entirely theirs, the loss to the country that was letting so much of its best blood go forth from it.

'There he is, bless him!' they cried, as Fergus stood still in the road, and took off his bonnet as he gave them greeting. Then Rob the piper ceased his strain, and the carts came to a standstill, and a score of hands were outstretched to bid good-bye to the 'young Laird,' as he was always called in the Fauld.

'We kenned ye wad turn up to wush us weel, lad,' cried the smith. 'We'll never forget ye, Maister Fergus. Ye hae aye been oor freen.'

'No, don't forget me. Some day, when I'm a man, I'll come out and see you a', answered Fergus, and there was a suspicious trembling in his voice, for the women were all crying, and he could see quite well that the men were feeling the trial quite as keenly, if they made less outward sign.

'Cheer up!' cried Fergus. 'You'll all grow rich and be lairds in your own right out there.'

'Ay, ay; but if we had our choice, lad, we ken whaur we wad fain be, an' under which laird,' said Rory Maclean, stroking his long yellow beard, and looking with mournful significance at Fergus.

'But we hae muckle to be thankful for, for we are no' gaun to a new country like beggars,' said the smith. 'Eh, lad, John Morrison will never shae your meer when ye get her as I wad. He'll never be a smith; but he'll hae some fun wi' the smiddy lum.'

This made a bit laugh among them, and before it had quite died away the carts moved on, and Rob struck up 'Lochaber no more.' Then all eyes were turned back, for in a moment the

Keeper's Wood would hide bonnie Glenquaich from their sight for evermore.

Then Fergus, with the salt tears blinding his eyes, waved a last good-bye, and turned back towards Shonnen. And so the first pioneers from Glenquaich set out for that far land across the seas which was to be a kinder mother to them than old Scotland had been. As the carts lumbered slowly down Dalreoch Brae to the strains of Rob's mournful piping, a carriage and pair came rapidly up the road. It was closed, but at the sound of the pipes a fair young face peered out in wondering surprise. 'Oh, Uncle Douglas, tell him to stop!' she cried excitedly. 'It is the people of Achnafauld going away to America, I am sure. I must speak to them.'

Sir Douglas, a little cross and tired with his hurried journeying, gave the order rather ungraciously, and when the carriage stopped Sheila opened the door and ran up the road to meet the carts. At sight of her a cheer broke forth from the travellers, the women ceased their low, mournful crooning of a Gaelic dirge, and their faces brightened at sight of that sweet, earnest young face, in which love and sorrow for them was so plainly expressed.

She had to go round and round shaking hands with every one, though I do not think she spoke many words. Her heart was full to overflowing, and she was just beginning to realize how fraught life is with hard experiences and bitter sorrows. But it was a satisfaction to her and to them to have that last good-bye. Sir Douglas Murray leaned back in the carriage, and did not look out while that scene was being enacted. Alastair's child was a very odd little girl, he had thought more than once since they had begun their hurried journey to Dalmore, but he did not trouble himself about her.

'Well, my dear, have you got your leave-takings over?' he said good-humouredly, when she took her seat again beside him.

'Yes, uncle,' was all she said, in a very quiet, self-possession manner.

He wondered why she was not crying over it, but her face was very grave and white, and she folded her hands on her knees, and sat up in a curious, composed way, which made her

uncle look at her again. She was certainly odd. She had the dignity and self-command of a person thrice her years.

Oh, Uncle Douglas, tell him to stop again!' she cried quite suddenly, just when they were past the inn. 'There is Fergus; I must stop and speak to Fergus.'

'My dear Sheila, you are a perfect nuisance,' said Sir Douglas. 'When do you suppose we'll get to Dalmore at this rate?'

But Sheila never heard him. She was leaning half out of the carriage window, with her hat pushed back, and the sweet morning wind tossing her brown hair on her white brow, her eyes shining with real gladness at sight of her old companion and friend.

'Sheila!' cried Fergus, and with a bound he was at the carriage door, and they clasped hands in silence, though their eyes were eloquently speaking.

'Oh, Fergus, I met the people. Did you see them? All the little Stewarts, and poor Eppie Maclean, with her lame leg. How awfully lonely and empty the Fauld will be, won't it, now?'

'Ay, it will,' Fergus said a little gruffly, to hide the emotion he had not mastered yet.

'And poor papa,' said Sheila, the tears welling in her soft, beautiful eyes. 'Oh, Fergus, how sad it is to live in this world, isn't it?'

Poor young things! Their early days were being darkly shadowed. The reality and solemn earnestness of human life was being forced upon them before they had tasted much of its glad some joy.

'Were you going up to Dalmore, Fergus? Will you come in? There's only Uncle Douglas,' said Sheila, but 'Uncle Douglas' never looked out.

'No, I was not going up just now. I'll come up by and by, Sheila, and see you.'

'Oh, do, very soon, dear Fergus! Good-bye just now,' said Sheila, and then the carriage rolled on again, and Fergus was left alone in the road. But somehow Sheila had comforted him. She alone understood and shared his feelings for the Fauld folk, and it is a great thing when an earnest soul finds its fellow; of course it can have but one issue, but the bairns were too young

yet to know the meaning of the curious yearning each had towards the other. Ah, they would understand it soon enough.

Sheila never spoke another word till they drove up to the door of Dalmore, and she sprang with a great sob into Aunt Ailsa's arms.

'My darling, keep quiet! Don't tremble so, my sweet,' said Aunt Ailsa, in those exquisite, tender tones which were like softest music. 'Come in, come in; you are so tired, my precious. But Aunt Ailsa is here.'

'Yes, yes, I will be quiet. Can I see papa just now, Aunt Ailsa? I don't think I can wait.'

'Only till you eat a morsel of breakfast, dear.'

'Aunt Ailsa, I couldn't take it. It would choke me. I am not hungry or tired or anything. Just let me go to papa. Oh, auntie, such a long, long, long journey! It seems like years since we left London.'

'Yes, dear, you were anxious to be home. I am so thankful you have come. Just in time, Sheila, just in time to say good-bye.'

'I knew it,' said Sheila quietly, as she laid off her hat, and smoothed her bright hair with hurried hands. 'Aunt Ailsa, I ought never to have gone away. I shall never forgive myself.'

'Hush, hush! that was for the best. This way, Sheila. Have you forgotten where papa's rooms are?'

At that moment Ellen Macleod came sweeping down the front staircase. Sheila only looked at her for a moment with startled eyes, and then passed through the library door. She no longer feared the strong, black-browed woman whom Fergus called 'mother,' but the memory of that cruel blow was burned into her heart.

'Just go in, Sheila. I shall wait here. I think the doctor is in,' whispered Lady Ailsa.

Sheila nodded, and walked with steady step into the chamber of the dying Laird.

The doctor and the housekeeper were standing by the bed. Macdonald, after a paroxysm of breathlessness, was lying white and still as death. Sheila stepped forward and silently knelt

down by the bed. She made no noise, but the sense of her beloved presence was with Macdonald, and he opened his eyes. The other two silently withdrew. Then Sheila bent over and laid her quivering lips to his brow.

'Papa! oh, dear papa!'

'My Sheila! My ain bairn! It is well,' said the Laird, in tones of deep content. He laid his feeble hand on her bonnie head, and his lips moved. He was blessing her. She felt it, though she could not hear any words.

There was a deep silence in the room, and then a slight struggle (harbinger of the end) shook Macdonald's wasted frame once more.

'Go away, Sheila; good-bye,' he said, with extreme difficulty. 'Fergus—be good to him; will in—'

He stopped and pointed vaguely round him. It was a last effort. Sheila shivered and fell upon her knees, covering her face with her hands. The others came hurriedly in. Aunt Ailsa put her arm round the kneeling girl and laid her gentle hand on her head. Sir Douglas stood by with folded arms, and in a few minutes the last struggle was over, and Macdonald had closed his eyes for ever on Dalmore.





CHAPTER XXII.

SHEILA'S INHERITANCE.

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men
Gang aft agley.

BURNS.

IN the library of Dalmore, on the afternoon of the fifth of April, there was gathered a party of nine persons. They were Sir Douglas and Lady Murray, with their son Alastair, and Sheila, Ellen Macleod and Fergus, Mr. Macfarlane, the minister of Amulree, Angus M'Bean, the factor, and David Colquhoun, the writer from Perth. All were in deep mourning; the gentlemen had just returned from the churchyard at Shian, where they had laid the Laird of Dalmore to his rest. Dinner was also over. Mr. Colquhoun had suggested that dinner should be served before the will was read, knowing very well that after the scene which would take place in the library these nine persons would never again break bread under the same roof-tree. For the first time for many years, Ellen Macleod once more presided at the table in the house of Dalmore. She was very gracious, even to the Murrays; she believed that their day was completely over. She did not wish it more fervently than they; their hope was that Fergus Macleod would prove to be his uncle's sole heir. They loved Sheila as their own child, and wished for nothing more than to take her away from Dalmore with them, as such, that very night. Lady Ailsa hoped and even prayed

for it, but did not expect it. A great fear lay upon her. She ate nothing at the table, and could scarcely take part in the quiet desultory talk which beguiled the hour. She was almost sick with apprehension, when they rose at length and filed into the library. There was no lingering at the table, the meal being purely formal. The moment dessert was over, Ellen Macleod rose and led the way from the room. She looked majestic in her stiff, trailing robe of black silk, with its heavy trimmings of crape. She moved with a consciousness of power and place, which gave Lady Ailsa a kind of fearsome amusement. Sheila looked exquisitely lovely in her plain black frock, kept close by her aunt, and sat beside her on the settee which stood in the square window of the library. Ellen Macleod seated herself near the table; the gentlemen all stood. There was an air of expectancy about them all, and Angus McBean was visibly excited. The two young persons most deeply and immediately interested were the most unconscious present.

'We are all ready, Mr. Colquhoun,' said Ellen Macleod, when the lawyer seemed to hesitate a little as he opened out the bundle of documents he held in his hand.

'Yes, madam; I shall not detain you long,' replied the lawyer courteously. 'The will itself is very brief and simple; whether it will be satisfactory or not to all present I cannot say.'

He cleared his throat a little, and straightened his high collar as if it impeded his utterance. Lady Ailsa clasped her hands almost convulsively over Sheila's, and leaned forward, her face pale with her intense excitement. Ellen Macleod had her hands placidly folded on the table; her face wore an expression of expectant complacency. Fergus was standing in the little corner window with his back to the company. He could see right up Glenquaich to the trees at Shian, and the sunlight was striking on the little burying-ground. He even fancied he could see the mound of the new-made grave. The lawyer's voice recalled his wandering thoughts.

'I, Graham James Macdonald of Dalmore and Findowie, declare this to be my last will and testament, for which all other

documents whatsoever must be set aside. I leave to Jane Cameron, my housekeeper, the sum of two hundred pounds, for her faithful attendance upon me. To John Macfarlane, the minister of Amulree, two hundred pounds, on condition that he acts as trustee on my estate; to my nephew, Fergus Macleod, presently residing at Shonnen Lodge, a thousand pounds, to stock the farm of which he spoke to me; and lastly, to my well beloved daughter, Sheila Murray Macdonald, the lands and estates of Dalmore and Findowie, together with all furnishings and plate and plenishing, and the entire residue of my estates, both personal and monetary, absolutely for her own use and benefit. I only ask that she shall retain Angus McBean of Auchloy as her steward until she shall reach the age of twenty-one, when she can act upon her own discretion.'

There was a moment's absolute silence when the lawyer ceased speaking. He was the first to break it by rising and approaching Sheila with outstretched hand.

'I congratulate you, Miss Murray Macdonald, upon your inheritance,' he said. Then Ellen Macleod rose slowly and majestically from her seat and faced those in the front window. Involuntarily Sir Douglas moved towards his wife. Fergus turned from his post and looked at his mother's face. It was absolutely colourless, but her eyes were like burning coal. Both hands, held straightly by her sides, were clenched until the nails were driven into the palms.

'David Colquhoun,' she said, and her very voice seemed changed, 'I give notice that in my son's name I contest this will.'

'Madam, if I may be permitted to advise, I say no,' said the lawyer quietly. 'The will is perfectly valid, and not unjust.'

'Not unjust!' screamed Ellen Macleod, her anger bursting forth like a fierce flame. 'Not unjust, David Colquhoun, for a man to pass by and slight his own for those who have no claim upon him! Not unjust! There is no court in Scotland which, knowing the circumstances, would hesitate to set it aside on account of undue influence. My brother's long illness weakened his intellect, and these people have turned it to their own advantage.'

'Have a care, Mrs. Macleod; your charges are actionable,' said Sir Douglas Murray, with haughty stiffness. 'Be pleased to remember of whom you are speaking, and be more careful.'

'I know very well of whom I am speaking, Sir Douglas Murray, but I do not so particularly blame you,' said Ellen Macleod, sweeping him a little haughty curtsey, which made his proud cheek redden. 'Ailsa Murray, will you answer me a question? Do you consider the will which has just been read as perfectly fair and just?'

Lady Ailsa rose, and Sheila, slipping her hand from her aunt's, went across the room to Fergus. For a moment her action was scarcely noticed. Ellen Macleod engrossed all attention.

'Ellen Macleod, it has been my unceasing hope and prayer that Macdonald would *not* make Sheila his heiress,' said Lady Ailsa sadly. 'I have never ceased to urge upon him his nephew's claim. It is to me a greater grief even than his death.'

'These are fine words, Ailsa Murray, but they are only words,' said Ellen Macleod, with a bitter sneer. 'But let that white-faced child not be too proud of her inheritance. There is a curse—the curse of the wronged and the robbed—upon Dalmore and upon her.'

'Look at these two, Ellen Macleod, and if you have a woman's heart pray to God to forgive your cruelty,' said Lady Ailsa, with brimming eyes, and pointing to the window recess where Sheila and Fergus stood side by side, Sheila with her slim girlish hand laid upon the arm of Fergus, and her sweet eyes uplifted to his face.

The abrupt silence arrested Sheila. She looked round, and then crossed the room again with a steady step. There was a dignity and grace about her which impressed all present. She stepped into the little circle, and directly faced the lawyer and the angry mistress of Shonnen. There was a breathless silence, which her sweet young voice immediately broke.

'Mr. Colquhoun,' she said clearly and distinctly, 'am I the mistress of Dalmore?'

The lawyer bowed his head. He had witnessed many curious scenes, but never one like this.

'Can I do what I like with it?'

'It is bequeathed to you absolutely for your own use and benefit, Miss Murray Macdonald,' he answered, quoting the terms of the will. Sheila turned aside. As she passed by Ellen Macleod she drew in her dress, lest it should touch the stiff, aggressive skirts of that relentless woman.

'Fergus, you hear!' she said, touching Fergus on the arm again. 'Dalmore is mine. I give it to you, so it does not belong to me any more. I know you love it, dear Fergus, and I give it to you.'

There was something indescribably pathetic in the look which passed between these two young things, just standing on the threshold of manhood and womanhood, and too early thrust upon its cares.

Fergus never spoke; but those who were present long remembered the expression upon his face.

'You're a brick, Sheila!' cried the boyish, matter-of-fact voice of Alastair Murray. It broke the strain. Sheila smiled wanly, and with tottering steps came back to Lady Ailsa and fell upon her breast.

'Take me away, Aunt Ailsa, take me away!' she sobbed, her whole form shaking. 'I am afraid of her. Take me away.'

Lady Ailsa wound her arm about the girl's quivering form and led her out of the room. When the door closed there was an awkward and uncomfortable pause. Ellen Macleod was rebuked in her inmost heart, but it suited her to assume a haughty scorn of the whole proceedings.

'Gentlemen, I fancy we need not prolong this interview?' said the lawyer, looking inquiringly round.

'I should imagine not. It has not been particularly pleasant, thanks to you, madam,' said Sir Douglas, looking fixedly at Ellen Macleod.

She merely shrugged her shoulders in reply.

'Mr. Colquhoun, I repeat that I intend to contest this will,' she said pointedly to the lawyer.

'Madam, no respectable practitioner would assist you, much

less any court of justice entertain your claim,' retorted the lawyer, for she wearied and disgusted him. 'Besides, your son, I fancy, would not support the claim you would raise on his behalf.'

'My son has a craven spirit. He should have flung back the insulting offer in the teeth of the child who made it,' said Ellen Macleod, her anger rising again. 'Receive a gift of his own, indeed, and to stand by tamely and hear it! I am ashamed of my son, Mr. Colquhoun.'

'Unless I am mistaken, he is ashamed of you,' said the lawyer shortly. He was grieved and sorry for the boy, who had been obliged to witness this unseemly scene and keep silent. There was a look of intense misery on his face, noted by all present. He turned about when the lawyer spoke, and went out of the room. Alastair slipped after him, and outside the door caught him and put his arm through his.

'Never mind, old boy, don't take on,' he said eagerly and affectionately. 'Everybody understands you, and—' He paused suddenly, for it would hardly do to say anything to Fergus about his own mother.

'And what a mother!' as Alastair remarked privately to his brothers that night. 'I tell you it's rough on a fellow having such an out-and-out Tartar of a mother.'

'Alastair,' said Fergus wearily, 'let me alone. I—I can't speak to you just now.'

'I see you're dreadfully cut up, but don't mind. Everybody knows you're a brick,' said Alastair quickly. 'But, I say, isn't Sheila a stunner, and didn't she give it hot to—'

Another abrupt pause.

'I'd better get out, or I'll put my foot in it,' muttered Alastair to himself. Fergus had not noticed it, however. But what *he* thought of Sheila nobody would ever know until the day came when he told Sheila herself. But that chance did not come for a long time.

'Well, I'll leave you, for I see I'm a bore. Mind you promised to come over to Murrayshaugh, and don't be cut up. It'll all come right—everything always does.' With which cheerful philosophy good-natured Alastair shook his friend

warmly by the hand and departed. Fergus walked on a few steps, and then, finding he was beginning to descend the hill, he paused for a moment as if undecided what to do. He looked across to Shonnen. There was no comfort there. His mother would follow soon; and, God help the lad! at that moment he shrank from his mother with his whole soul. He turned round, and cut his way through the thicket to the heathery steep behind the house. Up, up. At the very crest of Crom Creagh he would be safe. He must be alone for a little, for there was a tumult raging in his soul. He took notice as he went of the fresh green shoots on the heather, and that here and there a daisy and a buttercup were in flower. The sweet spring day was passing fair and full of divinest promise, but his mind was dull and forlorn. He felt very desolate upon the face of the earth. His strong young limbs soon climbed the steep ascent, and among the boulders and rough bracken on the very summit of the hill he sat him down. A ewe and her twin lambs, grown strong and sturdy with the genial sun, eyed him in mild surprise, but did not appear timid in his presence. He sat down on a stone, and, taking off his cap, allowed the grand healthful wind to blow about him. Even in the absolute calm of a summer's day it was always breezy up Crom Creagh.

Away up bonnie Glenquaich the sun shone radiantly, the loch glowed and flashed like burnished silver, and the winding river made a silver thread, too, among the green meadow-lands on either side. He was looking straight down on Achnafauld, and mechanically counted sixteen 'reeking lums' where there had been formerly four-and-twenty. There were seven empty houses in the clachan, and the beginning of Rob's prophecy was fulfilled. Glenquaich! which he loved and had hoped to call his own. That brief, bright dream was over, and it belonged to Sheila now. Memories crowded upon the lad, for when hope seems quenched memory sometimes has a healing touch. They were tender memories of Uncle Graham and of his sweet wife, who were sleeping now side by side in Shian, reunited by death.

Through the blinding tears which had broken down the

miserable stony calm that had bound him in the house, he presently caught sight of a horse and rider crossing the Girron Brig. It was Angus McBean, the factor, away home to A' chloy. 'Ay, ay,' he was muttering to himself. 'One-and-twenty! It's a pair fushionless fowl that canna feather its nest in five years.'





CHAPTER XXIII.

PLANS.

O pusillanimous heart, be comforted,
And, like a cheerful traveller, take the road,
Singing beside the hedge.

E. B. BROWNING.



LADY AILSA took Sheila up to the drawing-room, and locked the door from within. Sitting down on a couch, she drew the poor sobbing child to her side, and let her cry until calmness came of its own accord.

'There now, Sheila, you are better now,' she said brightly. 'A pretty way, young lady, to receive the announcement that you are a great heiress.'

'Aunt Ailsa, never, never say that again,' said Sheila quickly. 'I am *not* a great heiress. Did you not hear me giving it all up to poor Fergus?'

'Yes, I heard and loved you for it, my darling. There was hardly a dry eye in the room. Fergus himself will never forget it, or I am mistaken in him. But, Sheila, listen to me.'

'Yes, Aunt Ailsa.'

'You can no more set aside your father's will than—than—any one else,' said Lady Ailsa, not caring to mention Ellen Macleod's name. 'You must be Lady of Dalmore and

Findowie, whether you will or no. Cheer up, my darling, it is not a thing to break your heart about, I am sure.'

'But Fergus, Aunt Ailsa?'

'My dear, Fergus will be the very last to grudge you your good fortune. I saw it in his eye. He is *not* his mother's son in that, Sheila. And then, who knows, you may make it up to him some day.'

'If I can, I will, Aunt Ailsa,' said the girl, grown much more composed, but still looking as if the thing weighed upon her heart. 'Just at the last papa spoke of Fergus, and I thought he said something about a will. Perhaps he regretted he had not made it different. Aunt Ailsa, it is not *fair* that I should have Dalmore, you know; though he called me his daughter, I was not really that.'

'You gave him a daughter's duty and love, Sheila. My child, I assure you there is nothing to make yourself miserable about,' said Lady Ailsa. 'You are old enough to understand things now, and when I tell you that Fergus has been punished for his mother's sake, you will know quite well it is true. She was very unkind to your poor papa once when she had no cause.'

'Poor Fergus!' repeated Sheila, her heart aching for her old friend and playmate. It seemed to her a far greater sorrow to him to have such a mother than to have lost Dalmore.

'Aunt Ailsa, wasn't it curious that papa mentioned in his will that Mr. McBean must stay on?' said Sheila musingly.

'Yes, that is a pity; but we can see about that afterwards.'

'If I had known this morning, when I met the people from the Fauld at Ballinreich, I should have asked them to go back,' said Sheila, a new thought striking her.

'Ay, very soon you will begin to exercise your privileges, Sheila,' said Lady Ailsa, with a smile. 'We women are very fond of the sweets of power. But I must go and see what your uncle is about; he will be chafing to get away. I suppose we must leave you behind?'

'In this house alone, Aunt Ailsa, I should *die*.'

‘Then will you go down to Murrayshaugh to-night?’

‘If you will take me.’

‘Of course I will. I saw Alastair’s face fall in the library once or twice. I fancied he thought this momentous day would make a serious change in his cousin. These boys adore you, Sheila, stupid fellows! but they never had a sister. Shall we go down now, then?’

‘Do you think she will be away?’ asked Sheila fearfully, now beginning to tremble again. Ellen Macleod had filled the child’s heart with terror six years before, and had renewed it that day.

‘Yes, yes. She will never stay; she knows the worst. I fancy Ellen Macleod will never be in Dalmore again unless some unlooked-for transformation takes place,’ said Lady Ailsa hastily. ‘You must be a brave little woman now, Sheila; remember, you have a position to uphold.’

Sheila sighed and shook her head. Her aunt thought how frail and slender she looked in her mourning, and how pale and even careworn her sweet face. She was very young to have such a responsibility laid upon her shoulders. Looking forward, Lady Ailsa could foresee nothing but greater care, and again wished passionately that Graham Macdonald had given back Sheila penniless as he had received her from the Murrays.

She unlocked the drawing-room door, and they went downstairs together again. The sound of voices guided them to the library; but, before letting Sheila enter, Lady Ailsa took the precaution to look in and make sure that Ellen Macleod had gone. In the far window, Sir Douglas, Mr. Macfarlane, and Mr. Colquhoun were talking together over the will. Alastair, after parting with Fergus, had sauntered round to the stables. Ellen Macleod had already crossed the Girton Brig on her way back to Shonnen Lodge, to which she was condemned for the rest of her life. We will not seek to follow her there, nor to analyze her thoughts. They were as dark as the depths of the loch made drumlie by a spate in winter. But she was to be pitted too.

‘Well, young lady?’ said Sir Douglas, turning kindly to Sheila when they entered the room. ‘I shouldn’t have dared

to call you a perfect nuisance the other morning had I known what was in prospect for you.'

'Don't, Uncle Douglas,' said Sheila, trying bravely to smile, but making rather a failure of it. 'Where is Alastair?'

'Oh, among the horses, likely. He went out after Fergus.'

Sheila's face brightened. She was very fond of Alastair, though he teased her unmercifully, and she knew he would cheer up poor Fergus. Had she only seen poor Fergus then, toiling up the rocky brow of Crom Creagli, with a dark cloud on his face, her heart would have sunk within her. She did hear about that lonely vigil, but that was long after, when memory scarcely had a sting. In the meantime she was spared the full knowledge of her old friend's suffering.

'When are we to go home, then?' asked Sir Douglas, turning to his wife. 'I have offered Mr. Colquhoun a drive, but unless we can start within an hour it will be of no use to him.'

'I daresay we can be ready, Sheila and I,' returned Lady Ailsa. 'She will go down with us to-night; we can easily come up when there is any need.'

Sir Douglas nodded, and the ladies again left the room. While Sheila went up to prepare, Lady Ailsa rang the house-keeper's bell, and waited for her in the hall.

'Come in here, Mrs. Cameron,' she said, when the house-keeper appeared, and, opening the dining-room door, motioned her to enter.

'The Laird's will has just been read, Mrs. Cameron,' said Lady Ailsa at once. 'I think it right to acquaint you with the contents. Miss Sheila has been left Lady of Dalmore.'

'God bless the poor dear bairn,' said Cameron, through her tears.

'She is greatly upset. I am afraid the thought is more a grief than a joy to her at present. We will take her away with us to-night. Don't you think that will be best?'

'Yes, my lady; it would be terribly lonesome for her here,' said Cameron. 'Pardon the question, Lady Ailsa, but is there anything for Mr. Fergus Macleod?'

'A thousand pounds. It is an unspeakable regret to us all

that *he* is not now Laird of Dalmore,' said Lady Ailsa, speaking out quite frankly to the faithful servant. 'I did what I could to persuade the Laird. I fear, Cameron, that the innocent often suffer for the guilty in this world.'

'What did *she* say? Did she hear it read, my lady?' asked Cameron, with an eagerness she could not repress.

'Yes; but what she said is not worth repetition, Cameron,' returned Lady Ailsa quietly. 'I am truly sorry for her boy.'

'And I, my lady, for oh, he has a true heart!' said the housekeeper, with tears in her eyes, and thereupon recounted to Lady Ailsa what had happened on the day of Mrs. Macdonald's death, six years before.

'This will be a sore blow to him, my lady, for he worships the very stones that lie about Dalmore. But it is a great joy to us to have such a sweet young lady as Miss Sheila over us.'

'She will be a gentle mistress, Cameron, and she will win the service of love,' said Lady Ailsa, with a smile. 'I need not ask you to look faithfully to the house for her sake. She has not much interest in it just yet, but it will soon awaken. Let everything go on quietly as before, and you will hear from me from time to time. I do not expect that Sheila will stay very long at Murrayshaugh.'

'Will she not go back to school, my lady?'

'I think not. She is really very highly accomplished for her years. We cannot lay any plans in the meantime, however, but we will let you know of any arrangements in good time.'

'My lady, do you think Mrs. Macleod will come over?' asked the housekeeper hesitatingly.

'I do not think so, but if she does you must be very firm. She has no right in the house now. She has forfeited it by her own actions. Say you have your orders to admit no one without permission from your mistress, Miss Murray Macdonald.'

'Very well, my lady,' said Cameron, with evident relief.

'Oh, Cameron, am I not forgetting a very important part of to-day's proceedings! Mr. Macdonald has left you two hundred

pounds for your faithful service, and I am sure you deserve it. I congratulate you with all my heart.'

'No, no; I only did my duty for my dear lady's sake, and he was a good master too,' said Cameron hastily. 'I have never had so good a place, nor people I loved so well. I hope to live and die in Dalmore.'

'If you do, I hope you will see some happy changes to atone for the sorrows you have seen in Dalmore,' said Lady Ailsa, and shook hands with the faithful servant as she turned to go.

From that time, if not before, Jane Cameron would have laid down her life for Dalmore and its sweet mistress. She felt that an absolute trust was reposed in her, and that calls out whatever is noble in the nature of gentle or simple.

Within the hour the carriage rolled away from Dalmore. Fergus saw it cross the Giron Brig, but, as it was half closed, he did not know Sheila was within. Just after sundown he rose and took his way down, not straight to the house, but by a slanting sheep-track which brought him out at Corrymuckloch Inn. Then he went over the hill-road to Achnafauld. Anywhere, anywhere, rather than back to Shonnen. God help the lad! he had a home which was no home; and his heart was hungry within him for the love which blessed the lives of others. When Alastair Murray had talked of his mother, with a kind of disrespectful tenderness which was true honour, as 'the dear old mater,' Fergus had listened with a kind of vague, yearning envy. His mother was a shadow on his life; and yet he loved her too, though not as he would and could have, if she had allowed him. The grey night-shadows were falling about Shian and the head of the loch when he reached the brow of the hill and saw the Glen before him once more. The sky was soft and tender, dappled with rose-fringed clouds, with here and there a bright star peeping out like gleams of heavenly promise. The air was full of peace, and laden with vague, subtle odours suggestive of bursting bud and blade in some wood. In the distance a cuckoo was calling sweetly to his mate, and the mountain burns were dancing merrily in their rocky beds; making that pleasant, gurgling murmur which is some-

times the only sound to break the solemn solitudes of the hills. It was a fair world. The lad's heart filled again at sight of the familiar strath, and at thought of the quiet grave at Shian, and of the exiles on the bosom of the broad Atlantic. In his loneliness and heart-break something prompted him to go to Rob Macnaughton, who always understood him, and would sympathize with him, he knew. Before he turned into the main road he took a long survey right along to Auchloy, lest any of the McBeans should be coming on horseback or afoot. He could not have borne to meet them then. But there was not a living thing to be seen but two or three cows wandering about the roadside seeking a bite of young grass. He quickened his pace, and in a few minutes crossed the burn, regardless of wetting his feet, and lifted the sneck of Rob's door. The loom was busy, he heard the click, click, of the needles as he entered; but Rob heard him, and, coming off his stool, joined him in the kitchen.

'Weel, lad?'

'Put the bolt in the door, Rob, quick,' said Fergus.

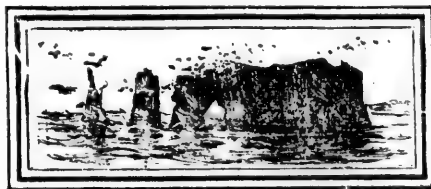
Rob did so, taking his time over it, and then carried the lamp from the shop into the kitchen. After he had set it upon the table, he turned his keen eye full on the lad's face. He had thrown himself on a creepie by the hearthstone, and was 'glowerin'' at the smouldering peats, as if he had interest in nothing else.

'Ye're a stranger, Maister Fergus,' said Rob slowly, and, reaching to the peat fire, he laid on some more fuel, though the night was close and warm. 'Maybe, though,' he added slowly, 'it's the Laird I'm speakin' till?'

'No, Rob, it's not the Laird,' said Fergus, with a strange, slow, flickering smile.

'Aweel, if it's no' the Laird, he hasna the Laird's cares to laud him doon, and they're no' sma' in they times,' said Rob cheerily, as he gave the peats a bit stir with his foot. He was keenly watching the face of Fergus all the while. He saw that the lad was sore vexed about something, and that in a minute it would all come out. He had a quick, warm, sympathetic heart, this rough, morose stocking-weaver, because he had the

poet's soul. He was never rough, never morose, never anything but genial and happy-hearted with these two young creatures, Fergus and Sheila, because he loved them, and they loved him. He went away back to the shop after a moment, pretending to look for his spectacles, and as he crossed the little passage between the two places he heard a sob break from the boy's lips. It was the first wave of the tempest. The pent spirit and aching heart found relief that night, ay, and comfort too, before Fergus Macleod left Rob Macnaughton's fireside.





CHAPTER XXIV.

THE AWAKENING.

'Twixt summer and her soul there seems to run
A power to feel together.

J. B. SELKIRK.



HEILA, Miss Gordon has come home to the manse. She is not strong, her father tells me, and has been obliged to give up her situation in Doncaster. I am going in to Logie-Murray this afternoon to see her.'

'May I go with you, Aunt Ailsa?

'I was just going to ask you, my dear. You are moping too much. You will enjoy the drive.'

'Oh, Aunt Ailsa, I don't mope. I am very happy here,' said Sheila quickly, but Aunt Ailsa only shook her head. She was concerned about Sheila. It was more than two months since Macdonald's death, and Sheila had been at Murrayshaugh all the time. She had never expressed any desire to return to Dalmore, even for a day, nor had she ever voluntarily spoken of the place or of her special interest in it. Murrayshaugh was very quiet during the summer months—Alastair in Edinburgh, and the other lads at Trinity College in Glenalmond. But for Sheila Murrayshaugh had been a childless house, only she was more of a woman now than a child. She had given up childish pursuits, and even when the lads would come over from Glen-

almond sometimes to spend Saturday, she did not care to share their romps as of yore. She had grown very quiet and womanly in her ways, and would sew and knit for her aunt's poor folk in Logie-Murray, or pore over her lesson-books, laboriously keeping up her German and French by reading the literature of those countries. Or she would go out for hours by herself with her sketching materials, and in the evenings practise her music, which, however, was not a task, but a labour of perfect love. Sheila was a born musician. Altogether, in her sixteenth year, Sheila was a model young lady, but Aunt Ail-a would rather have had the Sheila of old, who tore her frocks climbing trees and fences, and wet her feet 'gumping' with her cousins in the burns. The boys had lost their clum, and Murrayshaugh its merry-hearted maiden. Lady Ailsa saw that the inheritance was weighing on the child's shoulders, and she did not know what to do with her, or how to act. Sometimes she remonstrated with her for sitting so closely over her books, then Sheila would say, with a little half sad, wholly pathetic smile,—

'Aunt Ailsa, I have such a lot to learn.'

And once, when Lady Ailsa had come upon her in the library poring over one of Sir Douglas's huge volumes on estate management, she had gone to her own room to have a good cry. She felt almost angry with the dead for leaving such an incubus on the young shoulders of the living.

Murrayshaugh was a sweet spot,—a low, large, commodious house, nestling among trees on the low ground beside the Logie, which watered the beautiful policies. In the early months of summer, when the trees wore their freshest garb, its sylvan loveliness could not be surpassed. But Sheila felt shut in sometimes, and fancied it was difficult to breathe in the close sheltered air among the woods and waters. She loved the heights, the bare, grand solitudes, where nothing but the heather grew. Dalmore was her ideal, and yet she did not seek to return to it, her own home, an inheritance which nobody could take away from her. The time had not come yet, but it was at hand. These quiet days at Murrayshaugh seemed a kind of preparation for a coming change. I think

Lady Ailsa, who loved the bairn with a mother's love, felt by and by that thought was maturing towards action, and so left her in peace.

After luncheon that afternoon, Sheila and her aunt set out in Lady Ailsa's pony carriage to drive through the leafy roads to the village. Sheila took the reins, and as Lady Ailsa leaned back among her comfortable cushions and looked at the straight, lithe young figure, and the clear-cut, sweet face, she gave an involuntary sigh.

'She'll make some of the lads' hearts ache yet; and what about her own? She takes everything so terribly in earnest.'

'Sheila, my dear, do you know you are quite a woman,' she said presently, giving expression to a part of her thought.

'I feel very old, Aunt Ailsa,' said Sheila quite soberly, and Lady Ailsa laughed.

'My child, I am forty-eight, and I am certain I never had such a sober, careworn face. I could shake you, Sheila, positively shake you.'

'Do it then, auntie,' said Sheila, laughing too. 'How well Punch and Judy go together, don't they?'

'Yes; they are very old too, but they take life easily, like their mistress. What a pleasant afternoon this is!'

'Delightful! We shall be out of the trees presently, and see about us, Aunt Ailsa. I don't like trees *very* much. They make the landscape pretty, but they seem to absorb the freshness of the air.'

'You talk like a book, child. I think Murrayshaugh the loveliest place in the world. How sweet Logie is looking this afternoon. Look at the sun striking the spire on the kirk. Confess now, Sheila, it is a pretty picture.'

'Very, Aunt Ailsa. I think I must come to the toll here and sketch the kirk,' said Sheila; but she was thinking of another kirk, bare, unlovely, uncomfortable within and without, but which was hallowed to her by many sweet memories which time would never dim. Punch and Judy, accustomed to follow the dictates of their own sweet wills, relaxed their steady trot presently, and began to ascend very leisurely the gentle slope of the road.

'When did Miss Gordon come home, auntie?' asked Sheila, still keeping her eyes fixed on the old kirk, which was bathed in the warm yellow sunlight.

'On Saturday.'

'Is she very ill?'

'No, only fagged out. Teaching in a school is very hard work, Sheila.'

'I think it must be.'

'I am very sorry for the minister. It is a very difficult problem how to rear and educate ten children on a very limited income. Harriet's help will be sadly missed.'

Sheila was silent. Her aunt wondered what sudden thought had brought that luminous light to her eyes. There was very little said after that. Having reached the crest of the little hill, Punch and Judy, with one accord, trotted gallantly down the brae into the village, up the long, wide, picturesque street, and drew up, with great satisfaction to themselves, at the white gates of the manse. Sheila jumped out, opened the gate, and led the ponies up the short, shady avenue to the front door. There was a basket chair on the lawn, from which a rather pale, delicate-looking girl rose and came forward to meet them. Her face flushed with pleasure at sight of her old pupil, and Sheila's eyes filled as she kissed her. There was such a change.

'I am so sorry you are ill, dear Miss Gordon,' she said affectionately.

'Not very ill, only tired out, Sheila,' returned Harriet Gordon. 'How are you, Lady Ailsa? Will you come up to the drawing-room. Mamma is lying down in the study, I think. The heat tries her.'

'Don't disturb her, then, on any account. It is you we have come to see, Harriet,' said Lady Ailsa kindly. 'Well, perhaps we had better go in; it is so sunny here.'

'It is never too sunny for me, Lady Ailsa,' said the minister's daughter. 'The spring winds in Doncaster shrivelled me up.'

She led the way into the manse, and up to the shabby but home-like drawing-room, in which everything was for use and comfort and very little for ornament. Sheila thought it a very pleasant room.

Then the minister himself came up, a fine-looking man, with a benevolent face somewhat marked with the lines of care. As Lady Ailsa had said, the upbringing of a large family on small means was a problem he was daily finding it more difficult to solve. Harriet's breakdown was a serious matter more ways than one. Her post as head mistress of the High School for Girls at Doncaster was very lucrative, but the strain had proved too much. She was unfeignedly glad to see her old pupil, with whom she had lived so happily for four years. But she was amazed to find her so changed. She had left her a careless, happy-hearted girl, and now found her a woman, with a woman's care and forethought.

'May I come and see you again to-morrow, Miss Gordon?' Sheila asked, when she saw her aunt preparing to go, after a short stay.

'Surely; come every day, dear Sheila. I feel as if I had to make a new acquaintance with you. Do you remember our happy days at Dalmore?'

Sheila flushed up quickly, but made no reply. Harriet Gordon could not but wonder why she was so sensitive about Dalmore.

'Aunt Ailsa, Mr. Gordon is not a very rich man, is he?' asked Sheila, as they drove away from the manse gate.

'Not rich at all, my dear, quite poor, and ten children. O dear me, I am so sorry for them! I see Harriet feels dreadfully having to come home, and these three boys at college are a dreadful drain upon poor Mr. Gordon's purse.'

'Aunt Ailsa, why are so many nice people poor and unhappy?'

'They may be poor at the manse, but they are not unhappy, Sheila—far from it. I never saw a more united and affectionate family. You must not run away with the idea that only rich people are happy. It is quite the reverse.'

'Oh, Aunt Ailsa, I know that,' said Sheila, in a low voice, and then a little silence fell upon them.

'Are you not tired having me at Murrayshaugh, auntie?' asked Sheila, after a while.

'Just listen to that lark. I am sure he will strain his dear

little throat,' said Aunt Ailsa mischievously, pointing with her parasol up to the blue expanse, where a lark was trilling his sweet, noisy song with all his might.

Sheila smiled.

'You are very naughty to laugh at me, Aunt Ailsa, when I am so sober. I want to talk very much in earnest to you.'

'Won't you talk very much in fun, just for a change? You are far too solemn and sober, Sheila; and I am going to be very angry with you from to-day.'

'You couldn't be angry if you tried, Aunt Ailsa,' said Sheila quietly, and was silent again for a little, keeping her eyes on the ponies' tossing heads.

'Aunt Ailsa,'—Sheila dropped the reins and looked quite round into her aunt's face,—'I—I—think it is time for me to go back to Dalmore.'

'Yes, my dear; I have been waiting for it.'

'I—I think that perhaps papa would not like me to stay away so long,' said Sheila, with a pathetic tremble in her voice. 'It is as if I did not like it, and oh, I do, Aunt Ailsa—better than any place in the world!'

'Yes, my dear, I understand.'

'I have been thinking such a great deal, Aunt Ailsa, often till my head ached dreadfully, trying to make up my mind what to do. I have been reading in Uncle Douglas's books.'

'Don't I know it? I saw you one day, and could have whipped you, Sheila.'

'I have been reading all about wills and everything.'

'What for? Your will was right enough, Sheila. Nothing will set it aside.'

'I know,' said Sheila, with a little sigh, 'and I can't give it up either. It would not be right. But, Aunt Ailsa, I think papa was sorry after about Fergus. Just think if he meant at the end to give him Dalmore, but could not make us understand. Wouldn't it be *dreadful*?'

'Sheila, it is very wrong of you to say such things. If you brood over this, you may do yourself serious injury.'

'O no, I won't. When I go to Dalmore, auntie, I am

going to look everywhere to see if there is any other will. Papa said something about it.'

Lady Ailsa listened in vexed silence. She saw that the girl was the slave of an idea which would cause her great trouble and anxiety if she brooded upon it.

'You may look, dear, to satisfy yourself, but I am quite sure you will never find what you seek. Now that it is all over, would it not be much better to try and be worthy of your inheritance, and do your duty as its mistress, than to make yourself and others miserable with these ideas? Sheila, it is not right.'

'Perhaps not, Aunt Ailsa, but I can't feel right about it. Dalmore *ought* to belong to Fergus. I will never forget that.'

'It may be his some day if you give it to him, Sheila,' said Aunt Ailsa, with a smile, but Sheila did not understand, and took the words in their literal sense.

'Perhaps he may take it some day,' she said hopefully. 'Aunt Ailsa, do you think Miss Gordon would come back to Dalmore with me? I have to learn some things yet. Then she could help them at home, and get strong herself at Dalmore.'

Aunt Ailsa took the girl's grave, sweet face in her hands and kissed it tenderly.

'God bless you, my darling, for ever and ever. I see you are to be a blessing to Dalmore.'



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CHAPTER XXV.

HOME.

Nae birdie sweeter sings,
In a' the warl' wide,
Than the lintie 'mong the whins
On our ain hill-side.

SADIE.



GOOD-BYE, then, Sheila. I shall come up some fine day soon, and see how you are getting on,' said Lady Ailsa. 'Harriet Gordon, see that she is kept in occupation. I leave her in your care.'

'I will look after her, Lady Ailsa,' said Harriet Gordon, looking at Sheila with all her heart in her eyes. No need to say how readily the kind offer had been accepted at the manse. Once more care was lifted from the minister's heart. The perfect rest, the fine, pure, bracing air, and the plentiful table at Dalmore would do more for his ailing daughter than even the mother's care at home. With ten mouths to fill every day, it is no easy task to provide tempting dainties, even for one.

So the carriage rolled away from Murrayshaugh, and along the smooth, wide road to Dunkeld, which was looking its loveliest that sunny June day.

Sheila had not much to say while they drove; but though her tongue was silent her eyes were busy, and when they passed by the richly-wooded low grounds, and turned up Strathbraan,

Harriet Gordon saw her look eagerly from side to side, noting each familiar landmark with loving interest and pride.

It was a long drive, and Harriet was a little tired before they reached Amulree.

'Oh, Miss Gordon! just look at Dalmore with the sun on it. Isn't it lovely?' Sheila cried, when they reached the top of Ballinreich Brae, and saw the whole face of Crom Creagh, with the old house lying snugly in its bosom, sheltered by dark pines, and waving, graceful birches. The sun was flashing in every window, and from the tower the flag was waving for the first time since it had been lowered at its master's death.

'That is to welcome you, Sheila. They are glad their young lady is coming home,' said Miss Gordon, with a pleased smile.

Sheila's eyes were full of tears. It would be but a sorry welcome after all, returning to an empty house, which was peopled only by memories and the shadowy forms of those who 'were not.' But the few servants in charge of the place had all gathered about the door, and Cameron, wearing a stiff black silk gown and her best lace cap, came forward with a smile and a tear to bid her young mistress welcome home. Sheila looked from one to another somewhat mournfully, and replied to their greetings in a low, quiet voice. It made the bairn feel her responsibility yet more when she saw them standing so respectfully before her—her own servants! She was very young to be mistress to anybody, and they saw what was her unuttered thought, and every heart was sore for her.

'Tea is in the drawing-room, Miss Sheila,' said Mrs. Cameron. 'Let me help you, Miss Gordon. You look so white and tired.'

'She is very tired, I am afraid. Will you be able to come to tea, Miss Gordon, or will you go and lie down for a while?' asked Sheila kindly.

'I will just go up to my own room. I am very sorry to be so useless, dear. I hope I shall be better soon.'

'O yes, I am sure you will. Take her up, Cameron, and I will go to the drawing-room for her tea,' said Sheila, thinking of others' comfort before her own.

She took up the tea, and sat by her governess while she drank it, and then, drawing down the blind and covering her up, she

bade her go to sleep, and ran downstairs. The housekeeper was waiting about the landing, anxious to see and speak with her. She was so glad to see the bairn back to her own home again.

'Do come into the drawing-room, while I am having tea,' said Sheila. 'I want to hear all about everything. Oh, have they had any news from the folk who left the Fauld?'

'Yes, Miss Sheila; about a week ago, Rob Macnaughton had a letter from the smith, and Ewan M'Fadyen, too, had one from his daughter Annie, who married young Stewart of Turrich. You'll remember her?'

'I did not know her, as she was a servant with the Miss Campbells at Shian; and did they all get safe over that dreadful sea?'

'All safe; and what do you think, Miss Sheila? sailing on the sea made old Mrs. Stewart quite well,' said the housekeeper, delighted to see the bairn so interested; 'and they are all in good spirits, and not a bit sorry they left the Glen.'

'I'm glad of that. I hope they will get on splendidly,' said Sheila fervently; 'and all the other folks are quite well? Do you ever see Katie Menzies?'

'Only on Sundays at the kirk, Miss Sheila. A bonnie, bonnie lassie Katie has grown. I hope she'll have grace to guide her. I'm whiles hearing what I dinna like;—but let that pass.'

'And Malcolm, who is so droll. How is Malcolm?'

'Just as he was. What a size he has grown! six feet in his stockings, if he is an inch, Miss Sheila, I am sure. And the auld wife is as thrawn as ever.'

'Oh, I must go down and see them all, now I have come.'

'You are going to bide, then?' asked Mrs. Cameron anxiously.

'Yes, I think so,' said Sheila, growing a little pale. 'You will be very kind to poor Miss Gordon, Cameron, and give her all she needs? I want her to grow very strong in Dalmore.'

'I'll do all I can, for she's a sweet young lady, and fine company she'll be for you,' said Cameron heartily. 'Oh, Miss Sheila, it's fell proud I am that ye are come home to your own.'

It's been but a dull house all the summer through without a head.'

'Am I the head, Cameron?' asked Sheila, with a pathetic little smile; then, quite suddenly, showing the current of her thoughts, she added, 'Fergus is not at Shonnen, is he?'

'No, Miss Sheila; but he will be in three weeks' time, Jessie Mackenzie was telling me yesterday. He is doing something splendid at the college.'

'He is very clever. Of course he would do splendidly,' said Sheila complacently. 'Oh, Cameron, don't you think it would have been grand if Fergus had been Laird of Dalmore? Then, how happy I could have been at Murrayshaugh; Aunt Ailsa's little girl, and nothing more.'

'We are very well pleased with our young lady, Miss Sheila,' said Cameron. 'There's not one in all Strathbraan or Glenquaich but what would say that.'

'Perhaps not; but all the same he ought to have had it,' said Sheila, with a sigh; and then she told to the faithful servant the few words Macdonald had said on that dark day he died, over which Sheila had brooded till she made herself ill.

'I want you to help me to look, Cameron,' she said; 'if there was another will, and Dalmore should belong to Fergus, how dreadful for me to be here!'

'Miss Sheila,' said the housekeeper somewhat hesitatingly, 'I want to tell you something that happened two nights before the Laird died. Master Fergus had been up to see him, and after he was away the Laird bade me get him his writing things out of the library. I gave them to him, and when he rang for me, about half an hour after, he had been writing something, for the ink was wet in the pen, and he had dried something on the blotting-pad, for it was quite clean when I gave it to him. But he never said anything, and there was no sign of any papers lying about.'

'It would be the will, Cameron! I knew there was one!' cried Sheila excitedly, jumping up. 'Let us go and look everywhere in the library. Oh, we must find it! We will find it, I am sure.'

Leaving her teacup half emptied on the table, Sheila was off downstairs like an arrow. The housekeeper followed her as quickly as she could, and found her with a drawer open in the Laird's secretaire.

'Look here, Miss Sheila,' said Cameron. 'I put past this blotting-pad, I don't know why. It has never been used since the Laird had it, though Mr. Colquhoun wrote a lot here after the Laird died. Can you read it?'

Sheila leaned on the housekeeper's shoulder, and fixed her eyes intently on the blotting-pad. The characters were strange, cramped-looking things, not easily deciphered, but she could make out quite clearly the name of Fergus Macleod, and further on, Dalmore.

'Cameron,' she said quite solemnly, 'this is the impress of the will; let us hunt all over the rooms. It can't be out of these few rooms, unless papa gave it to some one.'

'That he didn't, Miss Sheila, for nobody saw him again till Lady Ailsa came. Angus McBean was here upon the Thursday, but I had the Laird's orders not to let him in, and bonnie angered he was at it, and gied me ill words about it. But when I have my orders I can be as firm as the Bass Rock.'

Sheila never answered. Her hands and eyes were busy among the straggling papers in the drawers, but, though they searched for an hour and more in every nook and cranny, nothing was found of the missing will—if, indeed, it had ever existed. The child was grievously disappointed, but would not quite give up hope. She carried the precious blotting-pad up to her own room, and locked it in her wardrobe drawer. Then she went up to see whether Miss Gordon was awake.

'I want to go along to Achnafauld, Miss Gordon,' she said, seeing that she was wide awake. 'Would it be too far to walk?'

'Well, perhaps, to-night, it would, dear. If you could wait till the morning, I would go with you.'

'I want to go to-night, though,' said Sheila. 'It will be light for a long time yet, and Malcolm and Katie Menzies will convoy

me home. I have never been at the Fauld, Miss Gordon, since last year, before I went to school.'

Sheila's listless, brooding thoughtfulness seemed to have vanished utterly. She was alert now, anxious to be up and doing. The time for action had come. Harriet Gordon, a few minutes later, watched the tall, slight, lissom figure, walking with swift, firm, purpose-like step along the white road from the Girron Brig, and smiled a little. Unless she was very much mistaken, the people's interests would be looked into, and as they had never been looked into in any laird's time. Sheila knew their inner life, and would take a personal interest in all their affairs. The governess, who, like most folk, disliked and distrusted Angus M'Bean, wondered how he would like the new rule. Though it was in the frail hands of a girl, it might be too firm for his taste.

Sheila did not meet any one on the road but the innkeeper's herd, who, not recognising her, bade her turn his cattle about if she met them 'wast the Glen.' She smiled, and, promising to do so, walked rapidly on. It was delightful to be out in these open roads, with the wide-spreading heathery moors on either side, and the cool, fresh mountain breezes blowing about her like the elixir of life. How solemn and majestic the towering peaks of the encircling hills! Looking back, the purple after-glow from the sunset lay exquisitely on the Girron, while Tom-nagrew was in darkest shadow. A golden shaft again touched the rugged shoulder of Craig Hulich. Light and shadow exquisitely blended or sharply contrasted gave to the landscape a beauty second in Sheila's eyes to none. She only looked once more to Craig Hulich, sharply defined against the clear amber sky; she could not forget that in Shonnen dwelt a woman who hated her with a terrible hatred, rendered doubly awful to Sheila, because it was the mother of Fergus Macleod who bore such causeless resentment against her. Away up the Glen the beauty of the summer evening was seen in its most striking aspect of perfect peace. There was not a ripple on the breast of the loch, and the Quaich, like a thread of gold, watered the low green banks, where the lambs were frisking about their mothers, and as if rejoicing in the sweetness of a perfect summer

day. The trees were green and lovely about Shian; but Sheila could not look often there. Some day she would visit that quiet resting-place, but not yet.

She did not meet the cattle on the road, but, seeing them on the slope of the brae leading over to Corrymuckloch, she took the trouble to go up and turn them about on their homeward way. The exertion heated her, and there was a lovely flush on her face when she reached the Fauld and entered Janet Menzies' cottage.

'Wha's that?' asked the old woman querulously; then she added a sharp sentence in Gaelic, which Sheila, of course, did not understand. 'Katie, ye deil! come here; there's a strange wummin at the door.'

'It's only me, Janet,' said Sheila, coming forward. 'Don't you know me? I missed you from your chair. Have you been long in bed?'

'Ay, ower lang. So it's you, Miss Sheila?' said Janet, ungraciously enough still. 'Katie, whaur are ye? Deil tak' her! she's never in. But I daursay she'll be helpin' some o' them wi' their kye. A'thing but her ain duty. Sit down. Are ye hame to Dalmore?'

'Yes; I only came to-day.'

'Jist about time, then, or ye needna ha' come ava. Leddy Cameron and her set wad sune eat ye oot o' hoose an' hame,' said Janet grimly. 'Whaur hae ye been a' this while?'

'At Murrayshaugh. Oh, here's Katie. How are you, Katie?'

'Miss Sheila!'

Katie blushed with pleasure, and somewhat shyly took the proffered hand. Two fair young creatures both were, as they stood there, each contrasting well with the other. Katie, in her fresh calico and spotless kerchief, her bonnie face bronzed with the sun, was as fair in her own way as the dainty young Lady of Dalmore.

'How diferent you look, Miss Sheila! I think I shouldna hae kent ye,' said Katie, knowing by the sweet, easy smile that there was no inner change.

'You are different, too, Katie. Isn't she bonnie, Janet?'

'Bonnie! I dinna see't. She's fair eneuch without ye tellin' her ony mair. The lads are beginnin' to rin aboot; a perfect heartbreak, besides an end to wark.'

'Oh, Aunt Janet!' said Katie, growing redder still. 'Never mind her, Miss Sheila. You must see Malcolm. I think he is over at the stocking-weaver's.'

'Well, I'm going there, so never mind telling him, Katie. Is your aunt always in her bed now?'

'Oo ay, aye abed!' grumbled the old woman. 'I'd rather be deid, and dune wi't. I dinna ken what pleasure it can gie the Almichty to keep me lyin', sair and weary, here.'

'Wheesht, auntie!' said Katie reprovingly; but Sheila could not help laughing at the odd speech.

'So word has come home from America, and they are to get on nicely?' she said, to change the subject.

'So they say, so they say—just lees, I tell them. Wha's to ken what's true and what's lees, and sae muckle water atween them?' said Jenny, in her usual cantankerous spirit. 'Ay, Angus M'Bean's gettin' the auld place cleared oot in braw style. He's Laird o' Dalmore noo, ye ken.'

'Aunt Janet, dinna be impudent,' said Katie, in a vexed tone. 'She's waur than she used to be, Miss Sheila, but nobody minds her.'

'You dinna, onyway, ye jaud! though I brocht ye up. Folks' ain bairns are bad, they say, though I never had ony, but ither folks' are a hantle waur. Will ye tak' my advice, Miss Sheila? If ye are the Leddy o' Dalmore, as they say, set that ill carle at Auchloy about his business. I ken him—wha better? He's feart for my crawin', an' thocht he'd get me shippet awa' to Canady; but Angus M'Bean an' me hae a wee bit account to settle yet.'





CHAPTER XXVI.

HER OWN FOLK.

Thou art no lingerer in a monarch's hall;
A joy thou art, and a wealth to all!
A bearer of hope unto land and sea.



ARE you gaun to bide at the big hoose noo, Miss Sheila?' Katie asked, following Sheila to the door when she went away.

'Yes, I think so. I have been a long time away, Katie. How is Malcolm? Is he quite strong now?'

'Only whiles,' answered Katie, with a shadow on her fair face. 'He gets himsel' into sic passions aboot naething, and he's as weak as water efter't, Miss Sheila. There's no' much to be made off the land, but it's better than naething. Ye'll no' let Mr. M'Bean put auntie oot o' the hoose, an' tak' the croft frae her at Martinmas?'

'Katie Menzies! how could you think of such a dreadful thing?' asked Sheila, in a shocked, sorrowful voice.

'Weel, Mr. M'Bean's aye tellin' Malky this'll be his last hairst,' said Katie, with tears in her eyes. 'You should see Malky after Mr. M'Bean's been speakin' till him. His een glower like fire, an' he fair shakes wi' rage. I'm terrified whiles for fear they fa' oot.'

'I'll see Malcolm, Katie; and don't you vex yourself about the house or the croft. Too many have left the Glen already. There will be no more if I can help it,' said Sheila, with the grave decision of a woman. The assurance comforted Katie, and she had a smile again as she said good-bye. Sheila crossed through the clachan, not caring to look at all at the 'smiddy,' where Donald and Mary had been wont to welcome her so warmly, and went straight to Rob Macnaughton's door. It was shut as usual, but, after giving a light tap, she went in. It was never broad daylight in these little, low, thatched cottages, and soon after sundown they had to light their lamps. But Rob and Malcolm Menzies were sitting in the red glow of the peat fire, and the little kitchen was full of curious shadows, made by the blending of daylight and firelight. It was a few seconds before Sheila's eye got so accustomed to the gloom that she could discern the two figures sitting by the hearth.

'It's only me, Rob,' she said, with a little laugh. 'Malcolm, how are you? I can hardly see you.'

'Bless the bairn!' said the stocking-weaver, springing up. 'Ye came in that canny a moose wadna hear ye. Malcolm and me's at the Gaelic. He's ta'en the notion to learn it, an' it keeps him oot o' mischief.'

Malcolm rose, blushing painfully, and shuffled awkwardly back from the fireside, quite ignoring the kind hand Sheila stretched out to him in greeting. A big, uncouth-looking fellow was Malcolm still,—a man in height, but loose and ill-hung, his bony cheeks gaunt and hollow, his eyes far sunken in his head, and his matted brown hair hanging in tangles about his face, quite hiding the high forehead, which, being always thus covered, was as white as snow, and sometimes, when he would push the hair aside, it showed in curious contrast against the swarthy, sunburnt hue of the lower part of his face.

'I have been in seeing your aunt and Katie, and I came over to see you, Malcolm,' said Sheila. 'And how is he getting on with the Gaelic, Rob? How fond he is of learning new things!'

'He's getting on faster than I can teach him,' said Rob, busying himself with the lamp on the table. 'But, faith, he asks for explanations I canna gie him. I'm no' a grammarian, ye ken; it's the hamert Gaelic I teach.'

'Sit down, Malcolm; don't go away because I have come in,' said Sheila kindly; but Malcolm, with a toss of his long hair, suddenly clutched his shanter, and disappeared like a shot out of the door.

'He's a queer ane, Miss Sheila,' said Rob, with his dry laugh. 'Ye never ken whaur ye hae him. But I'm jist as weel pleased he's gane. Sit doon, sit doon. So ye've come back, my bairnie, to your ain?'

The harsh voice of the stocking-weaver became soft and low as he uttered the last sentence, and his rugged eyes looked with a peculiar tenderness at the sweet, refined face of the young creature sitting by his hearth.

'Yes, Rob,' said Sheila, with a catch in her voice; 'I came back to-day.'

'An' the auld hoose seemed empty, and the bit heart cried out for them that's awa? Ay, ay,' said Rob, as he stirred up the peats on the hearth to make a cheery glow, 'it was a bairn that gaed awa, an' I see it's a woman that has come back. But she'll be guided and blessed, for the blessin' o' the Lord is upon her.'

Sheila sat very still; feeling, indeed, as if some precious benison was falling on her head.

'It is empty and sad, Rob,' she said at length; 'and oh, how different it is here at the Fauld, too! There's only you and the Menzies, where there used to be so many.'

'Ay, an' there'll be fewer. He's to put Malcolm oot, they say, at the back-end; but afore that there'll maybe be an ill deed dune in the Glen that will bring a curse upon it.'

'He will *not* put Malcolm out, Rob. I have come home,' said Sheila; and her sweet mouth became proud and determined, and her soft eyes flashed with a brave resolve.

The stocking-weaver gave his knee a great slap with his horny hand, and chuckled merrily.

'Ay, ay, the bairn is a woman, an' he's to get his match. Sic fun!'

Sheila laughed a little, too. That curious chuckle of Rob's was very contagious.

'Rob, will you take another pupil? I want to learn Gaelic too,' she said presently.

'You learn frae me! Ye heard what I said, it's hamert Gaelic I teach; I hinna grammar.'

'Don't tell me that, Rob, when you can write such perfect little poems. I heard a great professor from Edinburgh at Murrayshaugh, one day, saying they were among the classic literature of Scotland, and I felt dreadful because I had never read them,' said Sheila quickly. 'I want you to teach me your own Gaelic, because I want to be able to read your poems, and to speak to the old people in the Glen in their own tongue.'

'Bless the bairn!' said Rob, under his breath, and stooped over the peats again to hide the moisture in his eye. Those outside who only knew the rough side of the stocking-weaver would not have known him in such a mood as this, but Sheila had never seen him in any other.

'I'm going to come about the Fauld a great deal, Rob,' she said, rising presently to go. 'I want to get to know everybody from Findowie up to Garrows. How long do you suppose it will take me to make acquaintance with them all?'

'I dinna ken. There's some o' them hardly worth the trouble, but ye'll find oot the ill wi' the guid. I see ye are beginnin' weel, my bairn, an' the new Leddy of Dalmore is to be such as was never seen.'

'Hush, Rob!' said Sheila, and her tears sprang again.

Rob sat long after she had left him, pondering the thing in his mind, with a dreamy expression on his face which betokened the deepest thought.

The new Lady of Dalmore was not to let the grass grow under her feet. Immediately after breakfast next morning the carriage was ordered, and great was the amazement of the coachman when he received his order to drive to the office of

Mr. Colquhoun, the lawyer in Perth. Miss Gordon was so far recovered that she was able to accompany her charge, but she was quite ignorant of the object of the journey. She thought to herself, however, that Lady Ailsa might have spared the injunctions to keep Sheila in occupation. There seemed to be a danger rather of her attempting too much.

'I think you should get down at the Salutation, Miss Gordon, and order our lunch,' said Sheila, when they reached Perth. 'I will not be long at Mr. Colquhoun's.'

The governess assented, and Sheila went alone to the lawyer's office. Needless to say, he was amazed to see her, but his greeting was most kind. The scene at Dalmore, through which his young client had carried herself so nobly, was still fresh in his memory.

'Yes, I am staying at Dalmore, Mr. Colquhoun,' she said, in answer to his first question, 'and I have come to ask you some questions. There are a great many things I want to know.'

As she spoke, she began to unfasten the string from a large flat parcel wrapped in brown paper. It was the blotting-pad the Laird had used the last time he had a pen in his hand. Mr. Colquhoun was perfectly amazed, but in a few words Sheila explained the whole matter to him. Her anxiety and distress even were so genuine, that he treated her communication with a corresponding gravity, though it amused him very much.

'My dear Miss Murray Macdonald,' he said, looking straight into the earnest face, 'I entreat you not to trouble yourself about this. I assure you Mr. Macdonald's mind was quite made up. His decision about Dalmore was unalterable. Both Lady Murray and I put Mr. Fergus Macleod's claim before him, but it was *you* he wished to heir Dalmore. The will carrying that wish into effect was only drawn up three days before his death. It was impossible—at least, most improbable—that he should change his mind. And supposing he had, would he not have given the new will, when he made it, into safe keeping, or put it where it would be found?'

'Well, perhaps,' said Sheila, but her tone was very doubtful.

'My dear young lady, I assure you it would vex and grieve your father if he knew of the needless anxiety you are giving yourself,' said the lawyer gravely and kindly. 'And why be so downcast about Mr. Fergus Macleod? His uncle did not forget him, and he is a clever young fellow, with life all before him. He may make a far better use of his talents because he has his own way to carve. This very thing which is vexing you may be the making of him.'

Sheila's face brightened. This was a side of the question which had never occurred to her before.

'So you must try and enjoy your inheritance. I am sure Dalmore could never have a sweeter mistress,' said the old lawyer gallantly.

'Then, if Dalmore is mine, I may do what I like; may I, Mr. Colquhoun?'

'Yes. In very important matters you would require to consult Mr. Macfarlane, the minister, as your trustee.'

'Suppose, then, Mr. Colquhoun, that Mr. M'Bean wished to put the cottars out of the Fauld, could I prevent him?'

'You are mistress of Dalmore; Angus M'Bean is your servant, Miss Murray Macdonald,' said the lawyer, with a dry smile of enjoyment. He did not like Angus M'Bean, and foresaw that the new Lady was to clip the ambitious factor's wings.

'Then I may tell him, Mr. Colquhoun, that he is to leave the Menzies alone, and all the rest of the folk? If they pay their rents, I wish them to stay.'

'You can tell him anything you like. It will do him good,' said the lawyer briskly. 'And in any difficulty with him come to me.'

'Thank you, that is all I wish to know,' said Sheila; and the look of grave anxiety quite lifted off her face. The lawyer handed her to her carriage with a deference he did not always pay to more important clients. She had roused his deepest interest and admiration.

Harriet Gordon was amazed at Sheila when she returned to the hotel. She was so bright and happy, more like the

Sheila of long ago. She talked gaily all the way home, pointing out every object of interest in the sma' glen,—the Roman camp, Ossian's grave, and the Soldier's grave,—not one was forgotten.

When they came near Corrymuckloch Inn, she stood up and bade the coachman go over the old road to Auchloy. They drew up at the factor's trimly kept lawn just as that gentleman was sitting down to his substantial three o'clock dinner. The two fine young ladies, in their starched muslins and glossy curls, immediately flew into a tremendous excitement at sight of the prancing horses at the dining-room window, and hid themselves behind the curtains to see who were in the carriage.

Mrs. M'Bean would have hurried to the door to welcome her distinguished guest, but her husband restrained her; and when Sheila asked for the factor, she was shown into the brand-new drawing-room like an ordinary caller. Young though she was, the child had her own pride, and felt that the factor might at least have come to the door. She was standing by the table, with her hand laid lightly on the fine embroidered cover, when the door opened, and Mr. M'Bean entered, all smiles, to greet the young Lady of Dalmore. He had assumed a benign, almost fatherly demeanour, which, however, was chilled by the grave, somewhat haughty, look in the young lady's face.

'Good-morning, Mr. M'Bean,' she said quietly.

'Good-morning, Miss Sheila. Pray be seated, and I will tell Mrs. M'Bean and the girls to come in. They will be charmed with your visit. When did you come to Dalmore?'

'I wish to speak to you, Mr. M'Bean,' said Sheila quite pointedly. 'I came to Dalmore yesterday, and I was at the Fauld last night. I heard from Malcolm Menzies that you spoke of making them leave the croft soon. I hope you will never say such a thing to them again. And if they can make more money with more land, they can have Rory Maclean's croft too. It is quite close by. I want the people to live happy and comfortable in the Fauld, and I am going to stay here and look after them now.'

Sheila delivered this brave speech without a quaver in her sweet young voice. Long afterwards, recalling that scene, she wondered at her own temerity, and laughed over the recollection of the blank, dumbfounded look on the face of Angus M'Bean.





CHAPTER XXVII.

HER RESOLVE.

Oh, it is sad to feel our heart-spring gone,
To lose hope, care not for the coming thing.

BAILEY.

ELLEN MACLEOD was dwelling alone in bitterness of soul at Shonnen. After the Laird's death and the reading of the will, Angus M-Bean paid no more court to the haughty, dark-browed mistress of the Lodge, and right well did she know why. It only added to the weight of wrong which seemed heaped upon her. If dark glances from an angry eye could have done evil to Dalmore, its summer beauty might well have been blasted; for often, often did Ellen Macleod stand at the upper windows of the Lodge, and in her heart curse the place and all who dwelt within it. But the curse causeless shall not come. Peace dwelt upon Dalmore, and its young mistress was happy with the happiness which comes of a contented, occupied, generous mind. The cloud had lifted from off the child, and though occasionally the ill fear that she might be unrighteously enjoying another's heritage rose up to darken the sunshine for a little, it soon passed. Occasionally she went to renew her search in the Laird's rooms, and even tap the old walls, after reading some tale of mystery and crime, to seek for some secret cavity, but

there was no romance of that kind about Dalmore. The old house of Findowie, now a ruin, was said to be filled with curious recesses and hidden rooms, and even to have underground passages below the bed of the Braan, in which the old Laird of Findowie had hidden in the dark days after Culloden, but there was no mystery of romance or intrigue about Dalmore.

Angus M'Bean had verily got his wings clipped. Mr. Macfarlane, the minister of Amulree, and Sheila's only trustee, was about as unfit for discharging the business part of his engagement as a man could possibly be. He was a student and a recluse, whose whole soul was engrossed by the study of every 'ology' except theology. He knew all the folk-lore of Perthshire, and had tales about Amulree and Glenquaich at his finger-ends which would make other folks' hair stand on end. He knew the very paths the fugitives had taken after Culloden, and the caves in which they hid. And as for brownies and warlocks, and other uncanny folk, he knew all their haunts, and every old 'ploy' in which the legends of the ingle-neuk gave them a part. He was a kindly, honest, simple old man, who preached practical discourses, unembellished by any rhetorical display or depth of reasoning, yet finely suited to the needs of his folk. Why Macdonald had left him sole trustee was a mystery, unless he had wished Sheila to have her own way absolutely. She consulted him on every point, but it was only a form, for he was with her, heart and soul, in her desire and plan to better the condition of the poor cottars in the Glen. He had long deplored the influence of Angus M'Bean with the old Laird, and had on more than one occasion treated that worthy to an unvarnished opinion, therefore he rejoiced that the old Laird's adopted daughter was beginning her reign so well. So the work of 'sweeping the Fauld off the face of the earth' came to a sudden end, and the place took a new lease of life. Malcolm Menzies got Rory Maclean's croft, and a horse, also two cows. The houses were repaired, and the wood driven from the head of the Glen by horses provided at the expense of the estate. Were I to attempt a description of Angus M'Bean's state of mind at finding himself foiled by a young girl, I should simply fail, so we shall leave him alone.

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Rob Macnaughton, the stocking-weaver, wrote occasionally to Fergus Macleod in Edinburgh, acquainting him with the happy changes taking place in the Glen, and Fergus rejoiced over it all in a manly, generous spirit, but was not much surprised. Sheila could never be anything but kind, and she knew and loved the folk just as he did. Fergus was not very happy in Edinburgh. A part of his college life he enjoyed, for, as was to be expected, he was a prime favourite with 'the fellows,' but he had no sympathy with the classical study he was pursuing. His heart was not in it, and he felt that it was mere waste of time and money for him to stay. He knew quite well that, after the final settlement of his uncle's affairs, his mother had again decided that he should study for the Church, but on that point the lad was absolutely determined. As the long, hot days of the summer session dragged away, he pondered the whole matter in his mind, engrossing his faculties with it in the very lecture-rooms, while the rest were busy with their books, and when the holidays came, his mind was made up as to what course he should pursue. He was just at the restless, unsettled age when youth seeks constantly after some new thing. His desire pointed that summer away across the sea to the new country where the first pioneers from Glenquaich had gone, and he asked no better destiny just then than to follow them, and cast in his lot with theirs. Nothing but labouring with his hands, and earning his bread by the sweat of his brow, would satisfy him; book learning and the classic shades of the grey old college were hateful to him, though they were the precious things of earth to others. Alastair Murray enjoyed himself very well in Edinburgh, dabbling in agricultural chemistry, and looking in occasionally at the law classes, but he had no particular end in view. There were plenty like him,—lairds' sons, who were supposed to get an insight into study which would fit them for the whole management of their estates, but who managed to make their college days more a play-time than lesson-time. Angus M'Bean belonged to a different class. He worked by fits and starts with all his might, when a more than usually impressive letter from Auchloy progged him up; but he was an idle, dissipated young upstart, who spent his

evenings in questionable company, and imagined himself a fine 'man about town.' Poor young fool! in that idea, unfortunately, he did not stand alone. He found plenty of companions, also; but Fergus seemed to be very much alone. Nobody could understand just how he felt, and altogether that was an unprofitable session for him, and he was glad when it came to an end.

It was a dreary, wet night when he trudged up the long miles between Dunkeld and Amulree, leaving his bag to come by the post-gig next day. He had travelled himself from Edinburgh, Alastair being away for a week's fishing in the Lammermuirs with the young Laird of Wemyss, and Puddin' M'Bean deeming it wise to remain a day or two in town, until the effects of the farewell supper had worn off, before he put in an appearance at Auchloy, and subjected himself to the keen paternal vision. Fergus felt rather dejected and miserable as he trudged along the sodden roads, and did not once look back that day at the mist-wreathed face of Craigybarns. He was rather inclined to turn his back on Scotland just then, having got himself into a 'drumlie' state of mind. He was just at Ballochraggan, when he heard a shout behind him, and, looking back, he saw a farmer's gig coming up rapidly, and recognised Donald Stewart, the farmer in Dalreoch on the Findowie side of the Braan. Fergus did not know him very well, for he was the largest farmer on the estate, and quite different from the cottars up the Glen. Dalreoch had very little to do with Angus M'Bean, even,—his rent being paid half-yearly to Mr. Colquhoun at the office in Perth. But Fergus knew him by repute as a fine man; and indeed his face, with its pleasant smile and honest, kindly eye, was enough to win respect and liking anywhere.

'Jump up, Mr. Fergus,' he said heartily. 'I was sure it was you. If you had only sent me word I could have met you at the train. There's nothing doing. We're just waiting fine weather for the hay.'

'It has been a lot of rain, I see, Mr. Stewart,' answered Fergus, jumping up, nothing loth, for he had not specially enjoyed his tramp. 'What a fine horse! She's a splendid trotter, surely?'

'Ay, Nellie knows her work,' said the farmer, nodding affectionately over at the mare. 'An' she does it, which is more than some folk do. You've got your holidays, Mr. Fergus?'

'Yes, two months, if I go back to college,' answered Fergus.

'You don't look very hardy. The hills will do ye good,' said the farmer, looking kindly at the young man's somewhat pale, thin face. Fergus had worried himself in Edinburgh, and worry always tells.

'I don't like the town. What's going on up here?' asked Fergus.

'No' much. Did the factor's son not come over with ye?'

'No,' returned Fergus, but did not tell the reason why. He was not a sneak or a tell-tale, though Angus would have told readily enough on him.

'And what will ye do with yourself all summer, do you think?'

'I don't know yet. They're getting on better at the Fauld now, Mr. Stewart?'

'Ay; the factor's gotten a new master,' returned Mr. Stewart, with a quiet laugh of enjoyment. 'It disna dae to ask him hoo he likes the Leddy's hand on his bridle, Mr. Fergus.'

'It'll do him good. He's a mean tyrant,' said Fergus savagely, glad to get his vexation out on somebody.

'And ye dinna like the college?' said the farmer musingly.

'No. I'll tell you what, Mr. Stewart; I'm going away after the Fauld folks to America,' said Fergus, impelled to confide in his kind friend. 'I'm sick of this old country. What can it do for a fellow?'

'It'll do ye good, Mr. Fergus. You'll come back, and think there's nae place like Scotland,' said the farmer, seeing there was something amiss with the lad. 'No' yet, Nellie; up the brae, lass.'

'Oh, there's no need, Mr. Stewart. I can walk perfectly.'

'I ken, but I'll drive ye up. I've nothing to do, anyway, in this rain. Up, Nellie! Besides, it's a pleasure to drive ye.'

The kind word, as well as the kind action, comforted the lad's sore heart, and took the chill edge off his return to Amulree

He talked more heartily as they went up Ballinreich Brae, and parted with Mr. Stewart at the Keeper's Wood with quite his old smile and ringing laugh.

'I'll come down and give you a day at the hay for this, Mr. Stewart. It'll keep me from wearying, anyway.'

'All right; see and come,' laughed the farmer, as he drove off; and Fergus walked on rapidly to Shonnen. He was glad he did not meet anybody on the road, but when he reached the gate of Shonnen, he saw his mother watching for him at the window. She was on the doorstep when he reached it, and her eye shone as it fell on her fine young son—shone with a motherly pride and affection which were perfectly justifiable.

'How are you, Fergus? I am glad you have come home,' she said, as she shook him by the hand. No warmer greeting than the hand-shake, so eminently Scotch, ever passed between them. 'You are early. Did you get a drive part of the way?'

'Yes, Mr. Stewart of Dalreoch drove me from Ballochraggan up,' said Fergus. 'How are you, mother? I hope you have a good tea. I'm perfectly famished.'

Ellen Macleod went into the dining-room with a more buoyant step than usual, and a look of pleased satisfaction on her face. Fergus's home-coming made a new interest in her life.

'Angus M'Bean did not come with you?' she said, as they sat down to tea.

'No; Angus was hardly ready to come home. He is not behaving himself as he might, mother. The lot he goes with had a spree last night, and I suppose he would have too much.'

'You never keep company with that set, I hope, Fergus?'

'Not I. You've only to look at me to know that,' replied Fergus, with his mouth full. 'We'll have to drop M'Bean's nickname, I doubt. He's as thin as a rake now. Anything new about Amulree, mother?'

'Nothing. At least, I don't hear it. You are looking well—not like a hard student.'

'I'm not a hard student,' responded Fergus frankly. 'Mother, I hate the whole thing! I feel perfectly mad listening to the

old professors droning away about things I've no interest in. I can't go on with it.'

'There is nothing else for it, my son,' said Ellen Macleod, with a peculiar pressure of her long, thin lips. 'It is not what you like, but what you can get to do, with you now.'

'Mother, it's a perfect waste of money, for I'm perfectly certain you could as soon make a minister out of Malcolm Menzies as me,—indeed, sooner, for Rob says that he has a poet's soul, whatever that may be. I'm a perfect clod, mother. I'd rather hire to be a shepherd with Dalreoch, even, than go on at that old college.'

'There is no use bringing up that vexed old question again, Fergus,' said Ellen Macleod. 'Your destiny is fixed, and you can't shirk it. You are a gentleman's son, and though circumstances have made you poor, you must act a gentleman's part. There is nothing for you but the Church.'

'O yes, there is, mother. Uncle Graham left me a thousand pounds to stock a farm, he said,' cried Fergus, alluding to his legacy for the first time. 'Mother, I've made up my mind. I think I'll go out to Canada after the Fauld folks. A thousand pounds will go further there than here, and there is no distinction. All men are gentlemen on the other side of the Atlantic.'

'Don't talk so absurdly, boy,' said Ellen Macleod, with a touch of her old impatient imperiousness. 'Do you think I would ever consent to your joining these people?'

Fergus reddened, and his brow clouded. Always the same! Without sympathy or commiseration for his feelings, or aspirations, or desires. His temper rose a little, for the Macdonald blood was hot, and he had reached an age when authority is scarcely tolerable. His mother saw the struggle, but did not even admire the manliness which enabled him to keep silent out of respect for her. She was a strange woman. She had no interest, or tie, indeed, to bind her to life but her one son; and yet she took a pride in making him completely subservient to her will. She would have him brave, manly, fearless, in everything and towards all but herself. She sought from the man the unquestioning obedience of the child. Mistaken woman! She would live to regret it. A certain latitude must be allowed

to youth; even the duty of the child to the parent becomes sometimes a matter to be settled by conscience. There are, alas! too many disobedient children; but there are also inconsiderate, tyrannical parents. Ellen Macleod sought to be a despot, and, though her kingdom held only one subject, she was to find it a hard task to rule.

A love of power is inborn in women, but it is tempered by the loving-kindness and gentleness of womanhood. But the latter had never been characteristics of this strong daughter of a Highland race. We will watch with interest the struggle between duty and inclination in the breast of Fergus Macleod.



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CHAPTER XXVIII.

COUSINS.

And life is thorny, and youth is vain,
And to be wroth with one we love
Doth work like madness in the brain.

COLERIDGE.



SHEILA, upon my word, you are the loveliest girl I ever saw.'

'Oh, Alastair Murray, you stupid, stupid boy! I think I shall set Tory on you. I don't think Edinburgh has improved you one single bit. Has it, Tory?'

Tory wagged his tail vigorously, and regarded Alastair with a menacing growl. The cousins were in the drawing-room at Dalmore. Alastair had just ridden up on his pony with a message from his mother to Sheila, and, being impressed by the great improvement in Sheila's appearance, had given vent to his rapturous admiration in no measured terms.

It was evident Sheila was growing up, indeed, for at her cousin's praise a sweet, conscious flush mantled her cheek. She did look very fair in her pure white gown, with its broad black sash; and what astonished Alastair most of all was that she had coiled her long plaits about her head, and made herself look quite a woman.

'It's true, Sheila; you're a perfect stunner! Be quiet, you

little beast!' he added to Tory, who sharpened his growl into a bark. 'I say, Sheila, what a lot of fellows 'll be sweet upon you immediately! I am, to begin with.'

Sheila laughed; and the sweet sound filled the old room with a ringing echo of gladness.

'Do you know you are frightfully vulgar, Alastair Murray? I only wish Aunt Ailsa heard you. Is that what she sent you to say?'

'No; but I suppose I may utter a few words on my own account,' said Alastair, in an injured voice. 'You needn't bother being stuck-up with me, you know, Sheila, because I won't stand it. Well, my mother wants to know *when* you are coming over, and I want to know if you are going to bury yourself here for ever?'

Sheila's bright face grew grave at these questions.

'I am very busy just now, Alastair.'

'Yes, I know. You are the little old woman who lived in a shoe,' said Alastair, in his comical, good-natured way, 'and I suppose we are of no account. Are we related to you, or are we not, Miss Murray Macdonald?'

'Oh, Alastair, do be serious for a moment. You have no idea what a lot I have to do. I am so anxious to have these houses sorted at the Fauld before winter, and unless I keep going over and looking after it myself, there is nothing done.'

Alastair looked at his young cousin in amazement. She spoke like an old woman, and looked, at that moment, as if the whole care of a world rested on her slender shoulders.

'But, Sheila, haven't you a factor? What's the use of all the fellows you pay to do your work, if you have to look after them?' he asked bluntly.

'You don't quite understand, and it would take too long to explain, Alastair,' said Sheila, smiling again. 'When does Aunt Ailsa want me to come over?'

'As soon as you can. Cecily and Mabel are coming from London. Perhaps that may induce you, if you won't come for us,' said Alastair pointedly.

'Aunt Ailsa knows I would rather be at Murrayshaugh than anywhere else in the world except here,' said Sheila.

'But I will come over and stay for a few days with Cecily and Mabel very soon. When are they coming?'

'To-morrow. But I say, Sheila, are you really going to stay here now? My mother says she thinks you are, but I didn't believe it.'

'Yes, Alastair, I am going to stay here now. It is home,' said Sheila, and her eyes grew dim.

'How queer you are! Don't you care for dancing, and all the fun and flirting other young ladies like? for you are a young lady now, Sheila,—more's the pity.'

'I like fun and frolic dearly, Alastair; but there is a great deal of work to be done first,' said Sheila, with such a grave, preoccupied face that Alastair stared yet more. To him Sheila was a great mystery. How any young girl, especially one so bright and beautiful as Sheila, should willingly bury herself in a place like Dalmore, and find her amusement in the worry and harassing detail of estate management, was a problem he could not set himself to solve. He had heard a good deal about Sheila and her Quixotic ideas at Murrays-haugh and from outsiders, but Sheila herself perplexed him profoundly.

'I don't know what will become of you, Sheila,' he said, a trifle hopelessly, as he gnawed the head of his riding switch, and mentally wished he could make growling Tory feel the weight of it. Tory evidently felt the weight of his responsibility, and did not approve of seeing a young gentleman in the Dalmore drawing-room, especially when he expressed himself with such unblushing candour.

Big, good-natured Alastair had a curious vein of soft sentiment in his nature, and he had always been in love with his pretty cousin. I fear he was now to learn that that early love-making on the bonnie banks of the Logie was to have for him a more serious side.

'When will you come, Sheila, so that I may fetch you?'

'I'll send a note over, Alastair. I can't fix a day until I get things in order for my absence,' said Sheila, with that delightful gravity which sat so quaintly upon her. 'Won't you have anything to eat after your long ride?'

'No, thanks; just rose from dinner. Upon my word, Sheila, I can't get over the change in you.'

'I must say the same of you. You are such a big man. We're all grown-up,' laughed Sheila. 'If you will excuse me for a little, Alastair, I will put on my habit and ride down as far as Ballinreich with you. There are some sick babies there I want to ask for. Scarlet fever, I fear, but I hope not.'

'All right. I don't care what it is, as long as it takes you to Ballinreich, and I can ride by you,' said Alastair daringly. Sheila shook her finger at him as she ran out of the room.

She did not keep him waiting long, and when she returned, in her dainty habit, with her bright, long plaits as of yore hanging to her waist, and the very smartest of little hats, just far enough off her head to shew the bright little ringlets on her brow, Alastair was hopelessly 'done for;' and to the end of his days he never saw any one equal to Sheila, though he was obliged to admire her from a consinly distance. Sheila was not a coquette, and her cousin's undisguised admiration rather disconcerted her. She knew she was fair,—her mirror told her so every day,—and she was glad, as she had a right to be, to think she was pleasant to look upon, but she was neither vain nor affected; a perfect naturalness was the child's chief charm. Half child, half woman, she was wholly, irresistibly winning.

'Have you seen Macleod since he came home?' asked Alastair, as they cantered down the hill.

'No,' answered Sheila; and perhaps it was the exertion she was making to keep her pony in curb that brought the vivid flush to her cheek.

'Poor Macleod! I'm sorry for him. He's a fine chap, Sheila. Don't you believe any one who tells you anything else.'

Sheila could have laughed right out, but her lips only curved in a curious little smile.

'And you know it's awful rough on a fellow, I always say, to have a mother like yon,' said Alastair, pointing over to Shonnen, which looked dark in the strong shadow of Craig Hulich. 'What do you suppose is to become of Macleod, Sheila? It won't be very easy for him to settle down in Strathbraan as a

farmer, though I've heard him speak of it. His mother means him to be a minister, but I can't fancy Macleod in the pulpit. Can you?'

'No,' answered Sheila, and her face was averted. She could not understand why it made her feel so strangely to hear another speak of Fergus, since scarcely an hour of the day passed when she did not think of him.

'Poor beggar! I *am* sorry for him. He's dreadfully cut up and down in the mouth sometimes,' continued Alastair, regaling Sheila's cousinly ear with scraps from his college repertoire. 'I really can't for the life of me think what's to become of him. Can you?'

Poor Alastair! He was utterly unconscious that he was probing a sore, sore wound in his cousin's heart.

'I daresay he will find a place,' she said, with difficulty, and rather shortly, for she could hardly bear what Alastair was saying. It brought back all the old wretched feeling that she had no right in Dalmore, and that she had done a mortal wrong to Fergus Macleod.

'He's a splendid fellow, Fergus. He always says he has no head; but old Rolling Pin—that's our mathematical professor—told the governor once that he had a splendid head, but wanted application. Fact is, Sheila, he's rather put upon all round. Hulloo! what are you crying for?'

'I wish you'd hold your tongue about Fergus Macleod!' cried Sheila indignantly. 'If you've nothing else to talk about, you can ride on by yourself.'

Alastair whistled.

'I beg your pardon, Sheila. How in the world was I to know Fergus and you weren't sailing in the same boat?' he said, plunging deeper into the mire, and blissfully unconscious of it. 'He's a little priggish and queer when you come to think of it, though the best fellow I know. I say, what times we'll have when you come over! Are they jolly girls, the Desarts, Sheila? You should know them, when you were at the same school.'

'Yes, they are very nice. I am sorry I spoke so quickly, Alastair,' said Sheila, turning to him with a lovely smile, which

would have melted a much harder heart than his. 'I am afraid I am cross and horrid, but I didn't mean to be.'

'Oh, come now, Sheila, don't make me feel perfectly ashamed,' said Alastair. 'I've enough to bear with the pride I feel at riding with such a fine young lady. You sit splendidly, Sheila, and what a pretty beast you have.'

'Papa bought it for my birthday just the week before he died. Cameron told me, the last time he was able to be out of bed was to go to the library window to see Rob Roy when he was brought home,' said Sheila, in a low voice, and with a yearning look in her soft grey eyes, which told Alastair how much she still missed the dead.

'Never mind,' he said quite tenderly, and laid his big hand on Rob Roy's glossy neck, to show sympathy for his mistress. 'We'll have as jolly a time as we ever had in our lives when you come over to Murrayshaugh.'

Sheila nodded, and they rode through Amulree in silence; a handsome, well-matched pair, as more than one said who saw them go by.

It was a lovely evening, the close of a perfect August day. The moors were purpling for the Twelfth, and even on these high lands there was a yellow tinge on the standing corn, which promised an early harvest. As they cantered up the slope by the Keeper's Wood, and swept round to the brow of Ballinreich Brae, the whole strath opened out before them a vision of beauty, with the green meadows and golden fields on either side of the river sloping up to the heather hills, which hemmed it in. The atmosphere was gloriously clear, and there was not even a haze of heat to obscure the view, and they could see, beyond the green stretches of the Athole woods, the dark face of Craigybarns, with its fir-crowned crest seeming to touch the pearly clouds.

'Confess now, Sheila, Strathbraan is far bonnier than Glenquaich,' said Alastair teasingly; but Sheila shook her head.

'It is pretty looking down, and Craigybarns and Birnam Hill are fine, but there is no loch, and the hills don't seem so majestic as ours.'

'You adore Glenquaich, Sheila. I think it a heathenish sort of place, though Fergus says there is good fishing in the lochs.'

said Alastair. 'Oh, you go off here, do you? Well, don't catch scarlet fever or anything to prevent you coming over, mind.'

Sheila laughed, and held out her hand, which Alastair took with a flourish, and in fun raised it to his lips.

'Dancing and deportment *à la Français*, taught here,' he laughed. 'Good-bye. I never saw anybody so jolly as you, Sheila.'

'You are very jolly too, when you are not stupid,' said Sheila, with her sweetest smile, for she really liked Alastair, who had always been kind to her at Murrayshaugh.

So they parted, and Sheila rode slowly up the side of a barley field to the clachan of Ballinreich, and, leaving her pony in charge of a village urchin, entered the house where the children were sick. Somebody watched all her movements with an interest of which she was quite unconscious. Fergus was strolling up General Wade's old road behind the Keeper's Wood, and from the hill had seen the riders on the road, had heard their merry laughter, and observed the apparent tenderness of their parting. He was still in a restless, moody, irritable state of mind, inclined to be at war with himself and all the world, and when he saw Sheila and Alastair apparently so thoroughly satisfied with each other, it gave him a kind of grim pleasure. Nobody cared anything for him; even Sheila never gave him a thought. Of course, Alastair had no more to do than woo and he would win, being one of the luckiest fellows in the world. After Sheila went up to Ballinreich, he threw himself in the heather, and started the grouse, who flew up with a whirr and a croak of alarm. Curiously enough, he had chosen a spot from which he could have unobserved a full view of the clachan, and could see Sheila when she came out of the house. When she did so, and mounted her pony, he picked himself up rather quickly, for, instead of turning back the way she had come, she came slowly riding up the old road, and would see him whichever way he liked to turn. They had never met since that remarkable night after Macdonald's burying, though they had thought a great deal more about each other than either knew. Sheila had not come far up the old road when she saw Fergus on

the hill, and he noticed her give a start, and pull up her pony as if he had stumbled on a stone. He came slowly over the heather to the road, and lifted his cap when he was within a few yards of her.

'Good-evening, Miss Murray Macdonald,' he said, not knowing what evil thing prompted him to call her by her formal name. She flushed all over, and then became quite pale. But she drew herself up in her saddle, and, instead of extending her hand, she merely acknowledged him by a distant little bow. Sheila showed very clearly that there was more of the woman than the child about her now. His greeting had hurt her sharply, but her pride came to the rescue.

'Are you not afraid to trust your pony on these abominable hill paths?' Fergus asked, as he walked by her side.

'Rob Roy is very sure-footed,' Sheila answered stiffly, still holding herself very straight, her sweet face white and cold-looking. But there was a blinding mist before her eyes, and she was obliged to keep her lashes down to hide it.

'I saw Murray up. He didn't think it worth his while to call at Shonnen, though he and I are supposed to be friendly,' said Fergus, with bitterness.

'It was my blame, perhaps;—he brought me a message from Aunt Ailsa, and I offered to ride as far as Ballinreich with him,' said Sheila quietly; but Fergus only gave a grunt. Sheila looked at him in sheer amazement. What had come over him? She had thought when she saw him, what a delightful talk they might have over old times, and what a pleasure it would be to tell him all she was doing and planning for Glenquich. She could not help thinking, girl-like, in the midst of her distressed perplexity, what a handsome, manly fellow he had grown, handsomer even than Alastair, who was called 'Murray's braw son' in Strathlogie.

They moved on in perfect silence until they left the hill path and were out on the road again. Then Fergus stopped.

'Good bye, then,' he said, standing still, and lifting his defiant eyes to Sheila's sweet face. He hated himself, he hated her, he hated all the world at that moment, poor fellow! Life seemed so hard; it held nothing for him but vexations and dis-

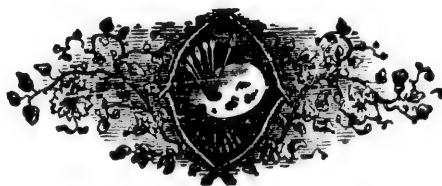
appointment and despair. He thought the very people in the Glen had turned against him, and that they had given their whole love and allegiance to Sheila; and yet, as he looked at the sweet, dear young face bent upon him so anxiously, and even imploringly, he longed to ask her to forgive him, even to give again to him the Sheila of old. To his distorted imagination she seemed changed; in reality, the change was wholly within him.

'I hope I shall see you again, Fergus,' she said, and offered her hand; but he did not take it.

'No, you won't; I'm going away,' he answered almost rudely.

'Where to?' asked Sheila, with startled eyes.

'Anywhere,—to the devil, perhaps,' was his extraordinary reply, and without another word he strode away.





CHAPTER XXIX.

SCHEMING STILL.

An' oh! it was a goodly tree
I socht to mak' a biggin' o'.

OLD SONG.



IN the factor's business-room at Auchloy sat Angus M'Bean and his hopeful son, in the grey dusk of an August evening. They were both smoking, and had grown a little confidential over their pipes.

'If it's true that Macleod is going to America,' said the factor, 'there's nothing in the way; you have the ball at your feet.'

'And suppose I don't want to kick it?' said young Angus, as he blew the smoke-wreaths gracefully over his red head, and turned his sallow countenance towards his father.

'Oh, but you will kick it, unless you are a perfect fool,' said the factor, assisting himself to a mouthful of whisky and water. 'It's not a position to be despised. Unless you're a perfect fool, as I said, you'd rather be a laird than a factor.'

'That's quite true; but it strikes me the ball would need a prodigious amount of effort even to set it going,' said Pud in' reflectively. 'In the first place, she won't even speak to me. She looks at me as if I were dirt.'

'Oh, nonsense! Miss Murray Macdonald is too well bred a

young lady to do that,' corrected the factor blandly. 'Angus, I'm convinced that I've pursued the wrong tactics for a while. It never does to oppose a woman, even a very young one. I began by trying to circumvent Miss Murray Macdonald, and in the end she circumvented me. Think of the young chit making herself mistress of all her legal rights and privileges before she made a move! I tell you, Angus, such a woman is worth the winning.'

'She'd wear the breeks,' said Angus plainly; 'at least, she'd try. But if it was me she had to deal with there would be a tough squabble. And so you think I might make myself Laird of Dalmore? Well, it would be a fine position; but I've no chance beside Macleod.'

'Nonsense! besides, he's going away. I must give you a piece of advice. You must flatter her, and take a consuming interest in all her fads. Women swallow flattery the same as calves swallow milk—wholesale, and when you *do* become master of Dalmore, you can put your foot on all these little plans. Just think! after all my worry and trouble with these Fauld folks, she has made up her mind to build it up into a flourishing community again. She doesn't approve of me, I can tell you; but she's fixed; she can't put me off for three years yet,—at least, she won't, because the old man expressed the wish that I should stay. A lot can be done in three years, lad.'

'You're right; but suppose I was willing to court Miss Murray Macdonald,—mind, I don't say I am, but supposing I was,—how am I to begin? There is a gulf between Auchloy and Dalmore.'

The factor screwed his face up into a knowing wink.

'When I was two-and-twenty I didn't need a hint about courting,' he said, with an ill-favoured smile. 'If you want chances you can make them. She's never out of the Fauld. What's to hinder you meeting her accidentally there, and taking a deep interest in all that's going on?'

'I'll think about it,' said Puddin', with rather a pleased, expectant expression on his face. The idea pleased him. He was bound to admire Sheila, as every one did, and the thought of making love to her was rather exciting. He was by no

means a novice in the art of love-making, both at home and in town. He had, indeed, a love affair going on in the Glen just then, but he did not mind having two strings to his bow. Puddin' was an enterprising youth, and filled to the brim with consummate conceit and confidence in himself.

'There's a lot of nests in Achnafauld I would like herried,' said the factor. 'That Malcolm Menzies, I hate the very sight of him. If the auld wife were dead I'd fix him up.'

'You can't,' said Puddin' serenely; 'because Sheila has taken them up. Look what she's done for them this summer already.'

'True enough, she has done a lot. If old Macfarlane had been anything but a gomeril, I would have had the whole thing done, and the estate in splendid working order. What does a minister know about business? She just winds him round her little finger. I whiles wonder, Angus, whether the Laird had any inkling how things would turn out, and whether he did it all to torment me. It was a queer will, wasn't it?'

'It did for Macleod, anyway, the insufferable prig!' said Angus savagely. 'There was not much love lost between him and Fergus Macleod. I won't believe he's off to America, till I hear he has arrived there.'

'I hope he'll go. He might stand in your way,' said the factor cautiously.

'He would if he could, but he never goes near Dalmore.'

'No; there's a dryness, thank goodness! between Shonnen and Dalmore. Fergus Macleod's wife, whoever she may be, will have an ill time of it with his mother.'

'I'm mair frightened for the Murrays, I confess, than Fergus or his mother,' continued the factor, after another sip at his tumbler. 'They'll look sharply after their niece, I'm thinking. I saw young Murray up not long ago. If they make a match of it, we're done for, lad.'

'They won't, if I can help it. I'll make myself sweet to Miss Sheila, first chance I get,' said Puddin', as he pushed back his chair, and gave his fine collar a pull up. 'Anything to kill the time; it's a dull hole this for a fellow.'

'Why don't you shoot and fish, like other young men?' asked his father.

'Too much of a bore, and deuced hard work besides,' said Angus, with a yawn. 'I'll away and take a stroll up to the Fauld, and see if I can fall in with Malcolm Menzies; it is good fun to raise his birse, and it needs mighty little raising sometimes. The fellow's more than half mad. He should be down at Murthly. I must tell him that.'

'You'd better not go too far with him. He had a graip up at me the other day. When the passion's on him, he does not care what he does.'

'I'm not afraid of him,' said Angus, as he slouched indolently out of the room. The factor was disappointed in his son, who had not turned out the smart lad he had hoped and expected him to be. Not but that he was smart and dandified enough in his appearance, and his tailor's bills were heavier than his class fees, but he had not as yet displayed any brilliance of intellect, or even an ordinary business capacity. So to marry him to Sheila Macdonald was the present dream of the ambitious factor's days. The two girls at Auchloy were miserable when their amiable brother was at home, and there were quarrellings in the house from morning till night. He was always jibing and jeering at them, and playing all sorts of unmanly tricks upon them. Poor Mrs. McBean was sorely exercised by her grown-up family, and thought regretfully of the days when they were bairns at her knee,—they hardly repaid her now for the toil of that early time.

Puddin' lounged out of the house with a Tam o' Shanter stuck on the back of his red head, and, still smoking, sauntered up the road to the Fauld. It was after sundown, and a bonnie harvest moon was rising above Crom Creagh, making a soft, soothing, exquisite light over purple moor and placid loch; but Puddin' had no soul to admire any of nature's fair pictures. He hated Auchloy, and but for one attraction could have wished to turn his back for ever on Glenquich. The clachan was very quiet, though a subdued hum from the smiddy greeted Angus as he passed by the end of Rob Macnaughton's house. He walked leisurely up over the bridge and down the back way

to Janet Menzies' cottage, which he entered without ceremony, as if he were a privileged visitor.

'That's you, wee M'Bean!' cried the invalid woman's shrill voice, the moment his foot crossed the threshold. 'Katie's no' in, so ye needna fash comin' further. An' if she wad dae my biddin', she wadna speak to ye though she were in. Ye come o' an ill kind.'

'Yes; but I'm an improvement on the old stock, Jenny,' said Angus slyly, as he put his head round the door. 'Tell me where Katie is, like a good old soul!'

'No, I winna. If she needs a convoy Malky can gang for her. If he heard ye speerin' for her he'd break yer back for ye.'

'There would be two at that, Jenny,' said Puddin', in his bragging way. 'So she's out of the clachan, that she needs a convoy? Ye've let the cat out of the bag already.'

'Have I? I didna say east or west,' said the old woman shrewdly. 'Awa ye go; ye are ower like yer faither to be a bonnie sicht.'

'You ought to be glad of my company when they're all out,' said Puddin', edging a little further in. 'Don't you weary lying there?'

'Weary? Od ay; but what's that to them? I'll no' be lang noo. I telt Katie the day that she widna be lang or she'd hae anither errand to Shian. I'll no' see the winter.'

'No fear of you! you're as lively as ever, Jenny,' said Angus, with a quiet chuckle, for she had unwittingly let out that Katie was away to Shian. 'Well, I won't bide to bother you. Tell Malcolm I was asking for him.'

And, with a grin, Puddin' took himself off. He went down to the loch side, and stood for a moment debating which way to go, but probably Katie would come home by Garrows, for the old road on the other side of the loch led through a lonely wood, which would be rather gruesome after nightfall. He had just decided to take the Garrows road when he saw Malcolm coming over the bridge from Kinloch, and stopped to have a word with him. He took a curious delight in aggravating poor Malcolm, who seemed to grow more moody and strange every

day. Even Rob, his faithful friend and sympathizer, sometimes feared the lad was going clean out of his senses.

'Fine night, Sir Malcolm,' said Angus banteringly, the moment he was within hearing. 'Looking over your extensive policies, eh? Many pheasants on your moors, eh? Would you give me a shot for the First?'

'Maybe I will, Puddin' M'Bean,' said Malcolm, with a strange, slow smile; and he fixed his gleaming eyes, with a curious, furtive look, on the other's face.

'A thousand thanks, but I should not dare to intrude myself on Sir Malcolm and his distinguished company of friends,' said Puddin', laughing at his own poor attempt at wit. 'But you've got round the soft side of Miss Murray Macdonald. My! what a fine steading you are getting! What if you set a match to it some night when you are in one of your tantrums?'

'Ay, what if I did that, eh? It would be a bonnie lowe,' said Malcolm quietly; but his clenched hands were beginning to tremble, and the anger was rising within him.

'You'd find yourself in Perth Penitentiary, or maybe in Murthly Asylum, if you tried anything of the kind; but maybe there are worse places than Murthly for the like of you,' said Angus, with a cruel, sneering smile. Instantly the blood rushed to Malcolm's face, and, with a muttered exclamation, he stooped down and picked up a huge stone to hurl at his tormentor. But Angus was too quick for him, and, with a light laugh, he dodged round the end of the house, and cut across the burn, and out to the road. Malcolm, still muttering, and with his face convulsively working, followed more slowly, but when he got round the corner Angus was out of sight. Poor Malcolm Menzies! The struggling gleams of intellect, which Rob Macnaughton had hoped would grow brighter and clearer, until manhood and the full knowledge of his own inherent power would finally disperse the dark cloud which seemed to obscure the lad's mind, were becoming dim and far between. Manhood brought no joy to the poor half-wit, no glorious sense of mental or physical strength. It seemed rather to cast a deeper shadow on his heart. Even the Fauld folks somewhat feared him at times, and bade the bairns steer clear

o him. Poor Malcolm! he would as soon have harmed a child as o e of his own lambs, who knew his very voice and step. Katie was the only one who could manage him rightly, and he worshipped her.

If he had the poet's soul, as Rob had so often held, it had never found a voice. He had grown tired of books, and even the rude music of the Gaelic had lost its charm. But who could tell what mystic music the lad's soul felt and responded to out among the mountain solitudes, where the ripple of the burn or the shrill call of the curlew were the only audible sounds? He loved these wilds, and avoided more than ever the haunts and presence of men. Even his kind old friend the stocking-weaver saw him but seldom.

With his hands thrust into his trousers pockets, he looked into the house.

'Where's Katie?' he asked his aunt.

'Oh, ye ken, ower to speer for Tam Burns at Wester Shian. There was a lad speerin' for her enow, and that'll be meanin' to gie her a convey.'

'Puddin' M'Bean?' asked Malcolm angrily.

'Maybe, an' maybe no'; an' if it was, can the lassie no' hae a lad without you at her heels, Malcolm Menzies? Ye are a bonnie lad to tie yer sister up like that.'

'Did ye tell him Katie was at Shian?'

'Maybe I did, an' maybe I didna. Come in an' shut the door, an' pit on some peats. I'm starvin' lyin' here.'

But Malcolm paid no heed. The very thought that Puddin' M'Bean should dare to go to meet Katie filled him with a burning indignation, and in a few minutes he was walking with long strides away west from the Fauld.





CHAPTER XXX.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

The merle said, Love is cause of honour aye,
Love makeis cowards manhood to purchase.

WILLIAM DUNBAR.



ABOUT half-way between Auchloy and the bridge at Shian Angus M'Bean met Katie. He heard her, before he saw her, crooning a love-song to herself, as she came swiftly on, not in the least timid though it was dark, but anxious to be home for her aunt's sake. Katie might be thoughtless at times, but she had a warm, kind heart. She had on her Sunday gown, a fine brown merino, made with a full skirt and a pointed bodice, cut open at the neck, where lay the white folds of the kerchief Katie wore with such sweetness and grace. Her hat was over her arm, and the night wind was playing at will with her bonnie hair, and her fair cheek was flushed with the healthful exercise of her quick, steady walk. Katie had grown a little vain of late, for folks were aye telling her how bonnie she was, and, poor lassie! she had no gentle mother to warn her not to lay such flattery to heart. But with all her little airs and conceits she was wholly winsome and loveable; and Angus M'Bean, the factor's son, had begun to think more seriously about her than he had ever thought about anybody in his life. And Katie?

Had the years mellowed her old aversion to the lad who had tormented her at school, and even yet lost no opportunity of teasing her brother, who had no ready tongue to answer back? We shall see.

She stopped her song quite suddenly when she heard the foot on the road, and when a sudden flash of the moon from behind a cloud revealed the figure in the distance. She hastily put on her hat, and even—oh, vain Katie!—gave her hair a hasty smooth, and let down her skirt, which she had gathered about her waist to save it from the dusty road. There was a demure, unconscious look in her sweet face, and she even managed to give a little start of surprise when Angus M'Bean stopped in front of her, though she had recognised his foot a hundred yards away.

'Oh, Mr. Angus!' she said, being much more civil to him than Malcolm ever was, 'what are ye doing here?'

'What could I be doing except coming to meet you?' he said gallantly. 'Why didn't you tell me last night that you were going to Shian, and I would have come all the way?'

'Oh, that would have been ower much, besides auntie would have heard,' said Katie shyly. 'How did ye find oot I was at Shian?'

'Your aunt told me,' said Puddin' unblushingly. 'She knews I have come to meet you, so there is no use being in such a hurry. It's not often I have the chance to speak to you when there's nobody by.'

'Were ye in the hoose?' asked Katie.

'Yes, of course; when I want to see you, Katie, I don't care who knows,' said Angus, with great emphasis. 'It's only you that is ashamed to be seen with me.'

'I'm no' ashamed,' began Katie hastily. 'But'—

Then she stopped, and the sweet, hot colour flushed all her face.

'But what?' asked Angus, bending his face eagerly down to hers.

'Dinna, Mr. Angus; ye ken what way,' said Katie, in distress. 'Ye ken what folks wad say if I were to walk oot wi' you, as ye are aye askin'.'

'Never mind them, Katie; they won't do half so much for you as I would,' said Angus, drawing her half-unwilling hand through his arm. He was quite sincere in what he said. His love for Katie Menzies was the purest and most honest feeling the factor's son had ever given house-room in his somewhat empty heart. She was so sweet and pure herself, her influence over him could not be for anything but good.

'Let us go inside the dyke and across the moor, instead of keeping to the road,' he suggested presently. 'I doubt Malcolm will be coming to meet you, and he hates me, I don't know why.'

Katie shivered.

'Ay, he's like to kill me when he sees me speakin' to ye,' she said, and he felt her hand tremble on his arm. 'Malky's awfu' queer gettin'; I'm whiles feared at him myself.'

The impulse was on Angus M'Bean to speak slightly of Malcolm, and to say that Murthly was the place for him, but he would not hurt Katie if he could help it, so he held his peace. Katie stepped over the drystone dyke, and thought, as he helped her, how different he was from the Fauld lads, who were so rough and uncouth, and knew nothing of the little attentions which all women love. Katie was hankering after being a lady, and had often watched Sheila Macdonald riding on the roads, and felt a strange, bitter envy mingle with the love she bore her. Why should one have so much and another so little? When a young heart begins to question the ordering of life it is upon a perilous brink, and needs a guiding hand; but Katie had none. So, in her discontented moments, Angus M'Bean's flattering attentions, bestowed at first because it was natural to him to make love to every pretty girl who would allow him, pleased and gratified her. He was gentlemanly in his manners when he liked, though he did not treat his mother or sisters to that side of his accomplishments. But the pastime begun in holiday-time was like to have a serious ending for all concerned. Katie had begun to think about Angus M'Bean day and night. Whatever he might be to others, he was always kind, tender, and considerate for her; then he was a gentleman. Poor Katie! these two words 'lady' and 'gentleman' were

words of exaggerated import to her. She knew nothing of the ladyhood of mind and heart which is independent of all outward circumstances. Nor did she dream that Rob Macnaughton, the stocking-weaver, stood upon a pinnacle of gentleness which Angus McBean, with his town airs and most silly conceits, would never reach.

'What a shame if Malky goes all the way to Shian!' said Katie, when they were away from the road.

'Never mind; it'll do him good,' said Angus quickly. 'Katie, I want you to write to me when I go back to Edinburgh.'

'When do ye gang?' asked Katie, in a low voice.

'In three weeks. What a short holiday this has seemed! I used to weary at Auchloy, but not this time.'

'Hae ye no'?' asked Katie; and her heart was beating, for she knew quite well that he meant she had kept him from wearying. 'Is young Mr. Macleod gaun back too?'

'I don't know, and I don't care, Katie. Fergus Macleod and I don't get on. The fellow's a prig, and thinks it's a sin to have the least bit lark.'

'I aye thocht him very nice,' said Katie innocently. 'Div ye think him an' Miss Sheila'll be man an' wife yet?'

'I don't think it likely,' said Angus, a little constrainedly, for he suddenly remembered that he was supposed to be a suitor for Sheila's hand himself. But, with Katie's hand clinging to his arm, and her bonnie, sweet face looking up shyly to his, he did not seem to care a pin for Sheila or her inheritance. What if love for this little country girl, whose pure heart and sweet face were her only dower, should make a man of Puddin' after all? He was certainly at his best with her.

'Some says she's to marry her cousin, young Mr. Murray,' said Katie, who seemed to take an absorbing interest in Sheila's settlement in life. 'Is he a nice chap, Mr. Angus?'

'Nice enough; soft a little,' said Angus, in his off-hand way, —not, of course, caring to tell Katie how persistently and completely Alastair Murray had ignored him in Edinburgh. 'I shouldn't care to marry Sheila Macdonald, Katie. Isn't she a bit of a tartar?'

'She's an angel, that's what I think, Mr. Angus,' said Katie simply. 'I never saw anybody like her. I wish I was rich an' grand like her, an' could ride aboot on a horse, an' build hooses for folk.'

'Perhaps you will some day, Katie.'

Katie shook her head.

'There's little chance. I'll hae to bide in the Fauld a' my days, likely, keeping the hoose an' milkin' Malky's kye.'

'Would you leave Malcolm if I asked you, Katie?'

Katie shook from head to foot, and in the clear moonlight she lifted her questioning eyes to her lover's face. There was a strange look on her face—half terror, half wondering joy. It was the look of a woman seeking to know what a man has to give in return for her love and trust. Angus McBean was quite in earnest, and his eyes met Katie's without flinching. He meant no ill. It was an honest love he was offering the girl at his side. He had learned enough evil, no doubt, among his wild comrades in Edinburgh, but there was good left in him still.

'Oh, Mr. Angus, what are ye sayin'? What do you mean?' she asked almost piteously.

'What I say, Katie. Will you be my bonnie wee wife some day, when I have a home to offer you?'

A sob of gladness broke from Katie's lips, and she allowed him to fold her to his heart, and to kiss her as a man kisses the woman of his choice. They were alone in the vast solitude of the moorland, with the loch gleaming whitely in the hollow below, and none to witness their betrothal but the stars that see all and keep silence.

'But I'm no' fit,' whispered Katie at length, with all the humility of love. 'Ye might marry somebody far grander an' bonnier.'

'Nobody will ever be grander or bonnier than you to me, Katie,' said Angus fondly. 'And I'll never marry anybody but you. You do like me, don't you, Katie?'

'Oh, I do! I do!' sobbed Katie; and Angus clasped her close again, and stroked her bonnie hair with a tender touch.

He had never felt as he did just then. All that was best in

his nature rose to the surface, called forth by the mysterious influence of this young creature, who gave him the implicit trust of love. He even felt ashamed of his past life, of his idle dreaming, and frivolous, evil waste of golden opportunity, and in a vague, uncertain kind of way made a vow for the future. He would live a different life henceforth for Katie's sake.

'Katie, you're far better than me, but I'll be better. I've wasted my time and behaved as I shouldna in Edinburgh, but I'll be different this winter, you'll see,' he said manfully.

If Katie had but known, she could have had no stronger proof of her lover's sincerity than that whispered confession and promise of amendment. But she only looked up into his face and said, with all her loving heart in her eyes,—

'I dinna want ye to be ony better, for fear ye dinna like me.'

'But what'll they say at Auchloy?' asked Katie, with a slight cloud on her brow, when, after a long lingering, they went on again towards the light in the Fauld.

'My mother will be delighted, I know,' said Angus at once. 'But, Katie, you'll need to leave it all to me. I'll make everything right. We'll need to keep it quiet for a little, you must mind, will you, Katie?'

'Oh, no' me; I'll haud my tongue for ever if you like,' said Katie. 'I'll be feared, onyway, for Malky kennin'. He'll be in an awfu' rage.'

'Katie, I'm afraid I haven't treated Malcolm very well. This very night I was teasing him. I won't do it again. I'm a horrid fellow, not half good enough for you.'

'Oh, dinna say that again!' pleaded Katie. 'An' Malky's awfu' tricky.'

'Ay; but I try to anger him,' said Angus, whose very nature seemed to have undergone a change in the last hour. 'I'll try a different plan with him. Maybe we'll win him to our side. Anyway, you'll stick to me, won't you, Katie?'

'Ay,' said Katie, in a whisper; but there was a world of confident resolve in that monosyllabic answer. Angus McBean felt like a different man. He could not believe that a simple declaration of love given and received could have wrought such

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a change. He had begun to pay attention to bonnie Katie Menzies more than a year before, to help to pass the holidays, a time which hung so heavy on his hands at Auchloy; and even at the beginning of this holiday, when he had been struck anew by her winsome grace, he had had no idea of this. From jest to earnest it had verily been with him, but it was a beautiful earnest, which was to bear fruit in his life. In spite of her little weaknesses, Katie was a true woman at heart, and was not found wanting when a crisis came.

'I'll go back to Edinburgh and work like blazes this winter,' said Angus cheerily, as they walked on hand in hand, but very slowly, it must be confessed.

'What are ye learnin' at the college?' Katie asked.

'Faith, I haven't learnt much yet,' Angus replied. 'I'm supposed to be learning to be a factor. There's the law classes, you know, I should attend. And then I have so many hours in the W.S.'s office in Castle Street. But I've been awfully idle.'

'And when ye are done wi' the college, will ye be like Mr. M'Bean at Auchloy?'

'Something like it, Katie. I hope I'll be able to give you as good a house. What grand times we'll have, won't we?'

'Splendid!' answered Katie; but there was a vague feeling of apprehension haunting her even in the midst of her happiness. She did not know what it was, but a little cloud seemed suddenly to have arisen on the horizon and obscured its brightness.

'You'll not weary, though it should be a long time, Katie? and you'll write often, and so will I; and I'll be back at New Year.'

'But ye arena goin' away for three weeks yet?'

'No, that's quite true, but I was only mentioning it. Is this the Fauld already? What a short walk it has been!'

'I doot it's late, for the smiddy licht's oot,—and see, so is Rob Macnaughton's! What o'clock is't?'

'Ten minutes past ten! Impossible! My watch must be wrong!' exclaimed Angus, who could not believe that two hours had passed since he met Katie just below Auchloy, not two miles from the Fauld.

'No, it's richt; I'll catch it,' said Katie. 'Guid-nicht; dinna keep me anither meenit.'

'Let me come in and explain matters to them, and take the scolding,' said Angus anxiously.

'O no, that wad be far waur; Malky would be terrible mad. Guid-nicht;' and, scarcely permitting a last kiss, Katie bounded through the clachan and into the house. Her aunt seemed to be asleep, but Malcolm was sitting by the fire, feeding it with peats, and wearing a very dark scowl on his face.

'A bonnie time o' nicht this!' he said, looking up at Katie. 'Are ye no' feared to stravaig the roads in the nicht time yersel'?'

'No' me. Is auntie sleepin'?' asked Katie, glad to get off so easily.

'Katie Menzies,' said Malcolm, rising, his two big melancholy eyes glowing like live coal, 'if ye gang oot the hills wi' Angus M'Bean again, I'll kill baith him an' you!'





CHAPTER XXXI.

IN BITTERNESS OF SOUL.

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them.

MILTON.



YOU had better get your books looked out, Fergus; I have got all the rest of your things ready,' said Ellen Macleod to her son, after their early dinner on the last day of September. Fergus rose to his feet, and pushed back his chair. The question which had been in abeyance all the holidays must be answered now.

'Then I *am* to go back to the university, am I?' he asked.

'Of course. Isn't that rather a superfluous question?' she asked, with slightly elevated brows.

'Mother, I *hate* to go! I'll never do any *good* at it. I don't think I can be a minister, even to please you.'

'And if you won't be a minister, what, *pray, are* you going to do?' she asked, with a slight sneer. She hated to have her plans set aside. Since Fergus could not be Laird of Dalmore, the next best thing for him was to follow in his father's footsteps. The best families in the country were proud to have sons in the Church.

'I told you already, mother, what I would like,' said Fergus, with something of entreaty in his voice. 'Let me go away to

America, to see for myself what the new world is like; and perhaps,' he added, with a slightly melancholy smile, 'I shall come back a better boy.'

'Fergus, I know not what I have done that I should have such an undutiful son,' said Ellen Macleod, with a touch of passion. 'Boy, I have planned, and schemed, and even sinned for you. I have exposed myself to insult and injury, in my endeavour to secure your rights for you. Where is your gratitude? Now that Dalmore is out of your reach, you ought to be thankful that such an honourable and gentlemanly calling is open to you.'

'I'm not denying that it is a good profession,' said Fergus, a little sullenly. 'I'm only saying I'm not fit for it. Mother, I should be a curse to the Church instead of a blessing to it, as a minister should be.'

'You are only a foolish boy, who doesn't know what he is talking about,' his mother retorted quickly. 'When you are a year or two older, you will discover that I acted for your good. Why, Fergus, a minister is on equal footing with the highest in the land. He sits down at the most exclusive tables in the county. Just look at your own father. He was of no family, yet I married him. The Church levels all distinctions; and you ought to be thankful, I say, that it is open to you.'

'But, mother, that isn't the point. I know all you say is true, but I don't want to wear a black coat and sit down at the exclusive tables in the county,' said Fergus hotly. 'I'm not fit for any of it. I'd rather take a shepherd's place any day, as I said before, than be a minister.'

Ellen Macleod did not speak for a moment. She was very angry, and very determined, too. But she saw determination as strong written on her son's brow, and began to realize that she had no longer a child to deal with, but a man who claimed a man's rights to decide his own course in life. Fergus was now in his twentieth year, and looked even older. His tall, muscular figure was firmly set; his face had lost the boyish look. He was a handsome, stalwart, manly fellow, who did not lack decision of character or determination. But it is not easy to set a determined will against a mother; and Fergus had been

so long under complete rule that he had a hesitation in claiming his own right of choice. But, whatever should be the result, the lad's mind was absolutely fixed on the Church question. He knew that to bind him down by such trammels, and to lay upon his shoulders grave responsibilities, which only the grace of God can lighten, would be simply to ruin his life. He was not without foresight and shrewdness, and he had seen and knew of many melancholy examples, both of 'stickit ministers,' and of those who, though in full charge, were not only useless, but who, by their inefficiency and unfitness, brought discredit on the Church. He would not add another name to that melancholy roll. Whatever his way of life, he would not make a failure of it. And all his tastes and inclinations and pursuits, though perfectly healthful and noble in themselves, were not of a kind which would sanctify the sacred calling of a minister.

'You had better look out your books,' said Ellen Macleod quite calmly, just as if the whole thing had been amicably settled. 'Isn't it upon Tuesday morning you will need to go? and this is Saturday. There is no use having a bustle and confusion at the end.'

Fergus bit his lip. Undutiful, angry words rose to his lips. Had he been less noble and self-denying he would have had no scruple in uttering them. Possibly they might have done good. I believe there are occasions and circumstances in which filial obedience ceases to be a duty. But Fergus *did* hold his peace, though the effort was tremendous. He picked up his cap and ran out of the house, feeling at that moment that nothing but the fresh wind of heaven would give him relief. It was a fine, mild autumn day. There was little sunshine, but a kind of subdued brightness seemed to pervade the soft light clouds in the sky. The air was perfectly motionless and still; every sound in the far distance sounded clearly and distinctly, as if it were just at hand. The bleating of a sheep up on the very pinnacle of Craig Hulich sounded so close to Fergus, that involuntarily he started and looked round. The summer was over. The bloom was fading on the heather, and there were no fresh buds on the wild flowers by the way-

side. The summer had been early, winter would be early too. Most of the sportsmen had left Strathbraan and Glenquaich, and the remaining grouse possessed the heather in peace. Fergus noticed all these little things which went to make up the sum of a quiet day among the hills. He even looked at the dappled clouds moving eastward, and wondered how long it would be before rain came. The corn was all in stooks on the crofts, but in these low-lying fields, exposed to the wet from the loch, it took long to winnow. Farming in Glenquaich was certainly a trial of patience and faith.

He walked on almost unconsciously by the rough, stony road to Kinloch, and through the clachan, quickening his step a little, not wishing to speak with any of the folks. There were few but bairns and old folk about, indeed, for all the able hands were in the harvest-field. The road which led to Shian, by the loch-side, cut through a bonnie birch wood for about half a mile,—a picturesque walk indeed, for the loch lay below, gleaming whitely through the drooping branches. Rowans were hanging in ripe red clusters, and even the bramble was taking on its richer purple hue. It was the birds' harvest as well as the harvest of the cottars in Glenquaich.

Fergus walked leisurely, with his hands in his pockets; but he took long, swinging strides, and, without any plan or effort, he seemed to come quite near to Shian shortly after he left the Lodge. He took up over the fields behind the old house of Shian, and came down on the kirkyard by a short cut. It was his first visit to his uncle's grave. Before he vaulted the low wall, he saw at the opposite side a little carriage and two grey ponies he recognised at once. Somebody from Dalmore was visiting the burying-ground; and when he looked to the corner where the Macdonalds lay, he saw Sheila down on her knees putting fresh flowers on the turf. In a moment he was over the wall, and had crossed to her side. He forgot everything but that it was Sheila, and that the sorrow in her heart was a sorrow he could understand and share. The dead were dear to her as they were to him. It came upon him then, quite suddenly, that Sheila, in spite of her great inheritance, was very forlorn. She had nobody in the wide world she

could call her own; and then she was a girl—one to whom love and companionship were like the breath of life.

'Sheila,' he said, his voice made very soft by the strong feeling of his heart, 'how are you to-day?'

Sheila started up, for she had not heard him come, but she had a smile for him, and when they shook hands he felt hers tremble.

'This is the first time I have been,' she said simply, as she stooped to place a bunch of late roses at the head. 'How strange to see you here! Do you come sometimes?'

'Never; this is the first time,' Fergus returned. 'Sheila, I was a brute to you last time I saw you. Forgive me for it.'

'O yes. I did not think about it in *that* way,' she said; and he knew she had thought of it, but with what bitterness of heart he little dreamed.

Her mouth quivered, and he saw her shake from head to foot as she still bent over the grave. She was very desolate, poor child! It seemed to her at that moment that all she loved lay beneath that green mound, and that there was very little worth having left in the world.

'Don't stand here, Sheila; it is not good for you,' said Fergus impulsively. 'Are you driving alone?'

'Yes; Miss Gordon would have come, but I thought I should like to be by myself.'

Will you let me drive you home, Sheila?'

'Of course, Fergus; it will be delightful,' she answered; and he saw a glad look steal into her eyes. After all, she *was* the same. He had only imagined a change in her. 'How quiet it is here; but oh, how lonely! When it gets dark, and the wind moans through these trees, I should be afraid,' she added, with a slight shiver.

It had done her no good to come. There is no comfort to the hungry heart of the living in viewing the last resting-place; it seems to widen the distance between the loved who have gone within the veil. Such was Sheila's thought, unexpressed, but felt deeply in her heart. Fergus felt perfectly happy as he handed Sheila into the carriage, and, jumping in beside her, took the reins. They had no thought of what the folks would

say; and, I daresay, if they had thought of it, would only have laughed. Were they not more like brother and sister than anything else? So Shian folks were exercised that afternoon by the sight of Miss Murray Macdonald's carriage crossing the Quaich Bridge driven by Fergus Macleod.

'You never come up to see me,' said Sheila, a little mischievously, as they bowled smoothly along the road. 'What have you done with yourself all summer?'

'Lounged about, and done nothing. I *did* put up hay at Dalreoch one day, and I tell you I liked it. I'm thinking of feeing with Mr. Stewart as shepherd, instead of going back to Edinburgh this winter.'

'Then you would live in the shepherd's house at Girron; and I should amuse myself at our drawing-room window watching you rescuing the sheep from the drifts, and falling into them yourself,' said Sheila, with a smile.

But Fergus grew suddenly quite grave and silent. 'Sheila, I wish you'd tell me what to do,' he said abruptly.

'What about, Fergus?'

'I can't make up my own mind. My mother insists that I must go back to college and finish the course. I want to go to Canada. I had a letter from Donald Macalpine. They are getting on splendidly, Sheila, and never wishing they were back.'

'Don't go to Canada, Fergus.'

Sheila's sweet voice faltered, and a strange thrill shot to the young man's heart. What a strange, sweet thought it was, that anybody—especially Sheila—should wish him to stay for his own sake!

'Well, but I can't be a minister, Sheila. I'd do some dreadful thing if I found myself in a pulpit with one of those fearsome black gowns on. And how could I make up sermons or say prayers? I'm not half good or reverent enough. I always think of the most idiotic things in church, somehow; so how could I be a minister?'

'Have you tried to tell your mother how you feel about it?' Sheila asked, with a slight hesitation; for she had really never quite got rid of her childish fear of Ellen Macleod.

'I've tried,' Fergus answered gloomily, 'but it's no use. She

can't understand, and I don't know what to do. It's not easy for a fellow to know what's his duty in this world. What do you think?'

'Fergus, how can I tell? Perhaps—perhaps, I think, you ought to obey your mother.'

'If I do, it will be the ruin of me. I shall never do an atom of good in this world to myself or any other body. I'll be a stickit minister, Sheila, and bring disgrace on my folks.'

'Not you. Whatever you do, you won't stick; and you know it,' she said, with quick confidence, which sent another warm glow to Fergus's riven heart. 'Do you think your mother will not relent after a while?'

'I am sure she won't,' Fergus answered gloomily.

'Oh, perhaps she will. In the meantime, if I were you, I'd go back to Edinburgh and learn with all my might,' said Sheila cheerily. 'Here we are at Auchloy. Just look at the dining-room window, Fergus, and see how many heads there are.'

'One, two, three; and there's Puddin's beacon,' said Fergus, making a wry face. 'Well, we've given them something to talk about.'

Sheila laughed too.

'You always call him "Puddin'" yet. What an atrocious name it is!'

'Good enough for him.'

'Oh, why? He is rather amiable, I think. He has been up at Dalmore once or twice, and both Miss Gordon and I think him much improved. They say in the Fauld, Fergus, that he is courting Katie Menzies.'

'Katie Menzies? Never! He'd better take care. If he makes fun of Katie I'll be into him.'

'Why, Fergus, how very pugnacious you are! So you are Katie's champion? Well, I shouldn't like to be your rival,' said Sheila teasingly.

'Oh, come now, Sheila. I'm not his rival at all, only I can't have him come making a fool of our village beauty. Why, if you knew the fellow as I know him, and the company he keeps,' said Fergus scathingly; 'he's not fit to speak to Katie Menzies, or to sit in the drawing-room at Dalmore.'



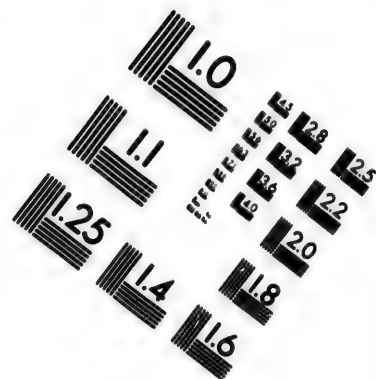
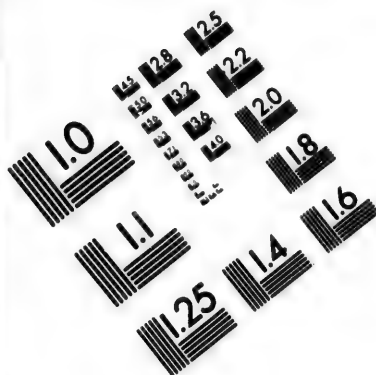
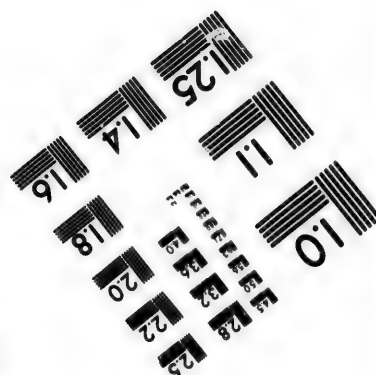
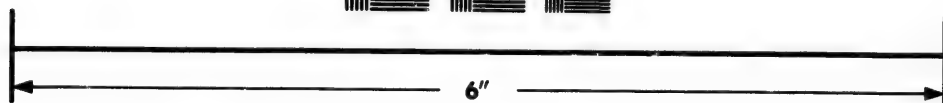
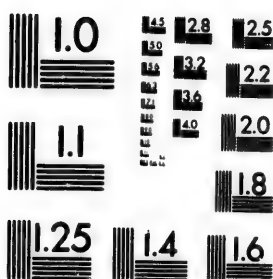


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'You are very hard on him—too hard, I think. I am sure he has improved,' said Sheila quietly; but her eyes were deeply shadowed. She did not like this hard, bitter, uncharitable side of Fergus. She began to fear that years had not improved him.

They did not talk very much as they swept along the road to the school; and when Fergus had carefully turned the corner, and set the ponies' heads towards the Giron Brig, he gave Sheila the reins, and jumped out.

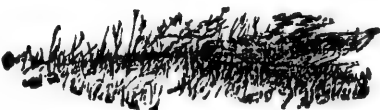
'Good-bye, then, Sheila; and thank you for allowing me to drive you,' he said, a trifle formally.

'Thank you for driving me,' Sheila answered, as she gave him her hand. 'Shall we see you at Dalmore before you go?'

'I don't think so. I have not the same interest in the place now.'

It was a cruel speech, only from the lips. Fergus did not know what always prompted him to hurt Sheila like that. She busied herself with the reins, and when they were straight she took the ponies' heads so sharply that they gave a step backward.

'I could wish, Fergus Macleod, that I had never seen Dalmore,' she said; and her eyes were bright and stedfast and cold, and her voice clear and distinct as a bell. 'It is a burden upon me I am scarcely able to bear. Good-bye.'





CHAPTER XXXII.

ALASTAIR'S WOOING.

Love sacrifices all things
To bless the thing it loves.

E. B. LYTTON.



THE result was, that Fergus went back to Edinburgh on the 3rd of October, and Ellen Macleod imagined her victory complete. Looking forward, she saw a vision which pleased her well,—her son established in his father's parish of Meiklemore (the minister of which was now an old man), and herself installed once more as mistress of the manse. She would gladly quit Shonnen any day. She had nothing to bind her to the place; and Dalmore, which she could see so splendidly from the windows of the Lodge, was a constant eyesore to her. She was a consummately selfish woman. Her planning was for her son, but it was always to be good for hers if likewise. She did not admit the possibility, even, that Fergus might desire to take a wife. His first duty, she considered, was to her. But Fergus had not the remotest intention of becoming minister of Meiklemore or of anywhere else. He was, for the time being, completely soured. Every hope and ambition blasted, the lad grew careless about everything. From idle habits he drifted into questionable company. Had his mother known how that winter session was spent, she

would have regretted forcing his inclination. The weekly letter, so dutifully written when he first went to Edinburgh, had become a thing of the past. From the 4th of October till Christmas, he did not send home a single line. I do not defend him, neither do I blame him wholly. Never had mother a more loveable, obedient child; never had child so harsh and inconsiderate a mother. It was to be expected that, sooner or later, the opposing wills must clash. Ellen Macleod was not fit to have that fine nature in her keeping. She had done her best to break that high, manly spirit, but had only warped and soured it. Every generous impulse, every impetuous boyish enthusiasm, she had chilled by the narrow coldness of her creed. The world was a mean, sordid place in the eyes of Ellen Macleod,—human nature a poor, empty, selfish thing;—and she had done her best to implant her ideas in the mind of her son. She had tried to make him believe himself wronged and abused by others, but in vain. The lad wanted no heritage but his own grand dower of manly independence, perfect health, and noble desire to cut out his own path in life. Poor fool! she would not even let him enjoy these, his heaven-born gifts. She fretted her own heart out for what was not hers, and tried to implant in him a similar weakening discontent. And when he turned upon her, and repaid her poor training with the indifference of a chilled and disappointed heart, she wrapped herself in the garb of self-righteousness, and esteemed herself a martyr. The whole world trampled upon her, even her own son, whom she had borne and reared.

So the winter dragged itself wearily away. Ellen Macleod lived her dark, melancholy days at Shonnen, with nothing to break their monotony, and Fergus— But I will not dwell upon this part of my hero's career. That blemished page was only laid bare to one, and then turned down for ever. Why, then, should we seek to pry into it? But I will say that, though he was weak, erring, blameworthy, he avoided the grosser sins in which too many of his colleagues indulged.

At Christmas, Alastair Murray came home as usual, Angus M'Bean also, but there was no word from or of Fergus. Ellen Macleod passed two days of consuming anxiety, and then walked

over to Auchloy. She was a gaunt, haggard-looking woman, grown old before her time. She did not take life easily, and those who worry and fret themselves must carry with them the outward seal of their discontent. Her dark, penetrating eye gleamed restlessly, her brow was deeply lined, her mouth marked by anxious, nervous-looking curves, which betrayed her inner unrest. She was greatly to be pitied. There did not exist in the wide world a creature more utterly desolate than she. She was shown into the smart drawing-room at Auchloy, and while she waited for Mrs. McBean, she looked contemptuously round the place, which was very showy, and much decorated by the fair hands of Jane and Bessie. Specimens of their skill in needlework and their artistic tendencies were visible everywhere. The paintings on the walls, signed by them, were productions of a fearful and wonderful kind. Mrs. Macleod was kept waiting quite a quarter of an hour. It was eleven o'clock in the day, and Mrs. McBean was still in her housewifely morning gown, and the young ladies in wrappers and curl-papers. Mrs. McBean, being without pride, would have gone as she was into the drawing-room, but her daughters were horrified at the suggestion, and carried her upstairs to be dressed hastily. The consequence was that, after a time, Mrs. McBean, very hot and flustered-looking, and wearing a very stiff black silk gown, quite out of place in her own house at that time of the day, at last managed to reach the presence of Mrs. Macleod.

'I'm sorry, I'm sure, to have kept you waiting so long, ma'am,' said she, the moment she was in the room, and to the horror of Miss Bessie, who was listening outside the door; 'but the lassies would hae me to put on my best goon. I hope I see ye weel, Mrs. Macleod?'

'I am quite well, thank you,' replied Mrs. Macleod, a little stiffly. 'I must apologize for my early call. It was your son I asked for. Is he not at home?'

'He's at hame, but he's no' in the hoose,' responded Mrs. McBean. 'I can send one of the lassies to look for him, if ye like.'

'Oh, it doesn't matter. I can see him again, I daresay. I

only wanted to ask him about my son. I—I have not heard from him lately, and I thought Angus might be able to tell me something about him.'

Mrs. M'Bean—motherly, feeling-hearted woman—looked at the unhappy mistress of Shonnen with genuine compassion.

'He's weel enough, onyway,' she said consolingly, 'for I hear Angus speaking aboot him. He saw him just afore he left Edinburgh.'

'Did he? Did he say what he was doing?' inquired Ellen Macleod, with an eagerness she could not repress. It cost her pride something to make these inquiries, but for the moment motherly anxiety was stronger than pride.

'I doot he's no' daein' just unco weel,' said Mrs. M'Bean, with blunt candour. 'Oh, ma'am, speak to me as ye like; I ken a' aboot it. My Angus gaed on the vera same way when he gaed to college first. The maister says a' young men maun come to the end o' their tether.'

'Does Angus say my son is not behaving as he should, then?' asked Ellen Macleod, with a sharp effort.

'Ay, weel, maybe he taks a drap whusky, or plays a game at the cairds, or gangs oftener than he should to thae ill places, the theatres, that if I were the Queen I'd stamp off the face o' the earth. They're the perfect ruination o' laddies and lassies, no' to speak o' aulder fules, that find the deil's pleasure in them,' said Mrs. M'Bean, with honest indignation. 'But dinna fash yersel', Maister Fergus is a guid, guid lad at the bottom. He'll come to the husks quicker nor my laddie. I'm thankfu' he has clean picket himsel' up this winter, an' he's workin' wi' a' his micht, an' livin' as I wad hae him live. But I ken what you feel. Many a sleepless nicht hae I putten in aboot Angus M'Bean.'

Ellen Macleod rose. Perhaps she had heard more than she wished or expected. She had very little to say. Mrs. M'Bean's homely-offered sympathy was irksome to her. She felt humiliated that she should have called it forth. But her worst fears were realized. Fergus was following in the prodigal's footsteps in Edinburgh. What, then, was to be done?

She thanked the factor's wife somewhat stiffly for her informa-

tion, and took her leave without so much as looking at the two young ladies, who were lingering about the hall, anxious to commend themselves to the lady of Shonnen. As she slipped out of the gate of Auchloy, a carriage came sweeping along the road from Shian. It was open, and in it sat Sheila, looking lovely in her warm winter attire, with the rich furs making a dainty setting for her sweet face. She flushed up at sight of Mrs. Macleod. The natural kindness of her heart prompted her to stop the carriage and offer her a drive, but it was as well she restrained herself. Ellen Macleod could not at that moment have given her a pleasant answer. It increased her bitterness to see the young mistress of Dalmore looking so bright and bonnie, riding in her own carriage, to which Ellen Macleod thought she had no right. Sheila had been at the graveyard with a wreath of Christmas roses. She was going over that day to Murrayshaugh to spend her Christmas, and, with a tender, sensitive thought, wished to leave a remembrance for those who would spend no more Christmases on earth.

That afternoon, over a cosy cup of tea in Lady Ailsa's boudoir, Sheila told of meeting Ellen Macleod.

'I am very sorry for her, Sheila,' said Lady Ailsa gently. 'Alastair says her son is not doing very well in Edinburgh.'

'In his classes, does he mean?' asked Sheila, with her eyes in her tea-cup.

'No. He is not behaving himself. He is drinking a little, and keeping company with a wild set. I am very sorry for him.'

'Aunt Ailsa, I don't believe a single word of it—not one!' cried Sheila indignantly, and her big eyes flashed fire—'not a single word! I don't believe Fergus Macleod would drink or do horrid things. He has been frightfully ill-used by everybody, I think; and I wish I knew how to make it up to him. And it's perfectly abominable of Alastair to tell such stories about his chum!'

Sheila had a temper of her own. Her aunt looked at her in amazement, which slowly melted away as a light dawned upon her.

'Fergus has a spirited champion, at any rate,' she said, a little dryly; for a hope she had formed for her own son was suddenly quenched. 'Alastair had no object in telling a falsehood about his chum, and my belief is that he has not told the worst. Whatever Alastair is, he is not spiteful. You are not just to your cousin, Sheila. But we will not allude to this vexed question again. What are you going to wear to-night, then?'

'I don't know, and I don't care! Aunt Ail-a, I am perfectly miserable!' cried Sheila, and there were real tears of pain in her bright eyes now. 'If Fergus Macleod had been Laird of Dalmore now, he would have been a good man. What use is it to me? It is just a burden on me, and nobody will take it from me.'

'Will they not? There are plenty waiting for the chance, I can tell you,' said Aunt Ailsa comically, though she was truly sorry for her niece. 'More than one gentleman to-night would gladly take Dalmore, and its bonnie mistress to the bargain.'

Sheila laughed. Her anger, flashing up in a moment, was gone as speedily; but Lady Ailsa saw that there was a sting left about Fergus Macleod. There was a dance for the young folks at Murrayshaugh that night, — one of those quiet but delightful entertainments for which Lady Ailsa was famous. She made home home-like and happy for her boys, and they simply adored her, and thought Murrayshaugh the dearest place in the world. It was a sight to see the little mother surrounded by her six tall sons; Roderick, the youngest, was fifteen now, and only half a head less than Alastair. But when Sheila came, their allegiance was divided. Sheila was a prime favourite among all the boys, but poor Alastair had begun to hink of her lately with something more than cousinly affection.

Sheila came down to the ball-room that night in a white silk gown, with the Macdonald tartan at her waist and on her sleeves, and a big bunch of white heather fastening her bodice, which was cut low, to reveal the white, stately contour of her throat. Her bright brown hair was coiled round her dainty head, and she looked like a young queen as she moved about, with a kind

word and ready smile for all Aunt Ailsa's guests. Many admiring glances followed her ; but Sheila was supremely unconscious of her own bewildering charms, and so was wholly irresistible and winning.

'Sheila, if you don't dance this reel with me, I'll be savage,' said Alastair, when the dancing was about half over. 'You've been dancing with a lot of blessed fellows you've no right to speak to.'

'Dear me! Alastair Murray, I thought all Aunt Ailsa's guests would be gentlemen,' said Sheila mischievously.

'Oh, well, I suppose they are. But, you know, I have some sort of a right to one dance, haven't I?'

'Oh, I daresay. But I'm tired, Alastair. If you like to get me a shawl, I'll go out with you till this reel is over.'

Alastair departed in rapture, and brought her somebody's wrap from the cloak-room, a dainty cloak of Stuart tartan silk, lined with swan's-down, and fastened with two big silver buckles.

'That isn't mine, Alastair. It's Alina Stuart's. See!'

'Never mind ; you won't hurt it. Come on, or the thing'll be over in a minute.'

So Alastair took her on his arm, and led her out to the terrace, where it was quiet and delicious, for the night was wonderfully mild for December. It was like to be a green Yule, though they had had several snow showers up at Amulree.

'Sheila, nobody in there can hold a candle to you. We are all proud of you,' began Alastair, in his outspoken fashion.

'How can you speak such utter nonsense, Alastair Murray?'

'It is not nonsense ; it's gospel,' said Alastair, too much in earnest to be particular about his words. 'I hope you won't go and take up with any of these fellows, and — and marry them.'

'How many of them?'

'Oh, well, one, of course. But you needn't laugh at me, Sheila. I'm awfully fond of you. I don't suppose, now, you

could care anything for a big, rough chap like me, could you?’

‘I do care a great deal for you, Alastair,’ said Sheila, not thinking, perhaps, of the hidden meaning in her cousin’s words. Her heart—ay, and her thoughts—were in Edinburgh with Fergus Macleod. Was she now beginning to awaken to the pain and yearning of her womanhood? Alastair saw the pre-occupied look. There was nothing in the frank, cousinly avowal to encourage him; nevertheless he went bravely on.

‘You don’t understand me, Sheila. I—I care about you in a different way. I love you, Sheila.’

‘Oh, Alastair, don’t say such a dreadful thing!’ cried Sheila, with crimson face, and hastily withdrawing her hand from his arm.

‘It isn’t dreadful—at least to me,’ said poor Alastair, quite humbly. ‘I’m in earnest, Sheila. Don’t you think, after a while, you might like me in that way?’

‘Oh, never! it is quite impossible,’ said Sheila, quite decidedly. ‘Don’t let us be so foolish. We are cousins and chums, Alastair, and will never be anything else. Don’t look so miserable. You’ll find you won’t care anything to-morrow. You’ll laugh at yourself.’

‘Will I?’ Alastair pulled his yellow moustache rather savagely. ‘That’s the way you girls speak. You know nothing about a man’s feelings, and care less.’

‘I do care, Alastair,’ said Sheila softly; and he saw she was vexed.

‘Don’t make that kind of face, Sheila. You make me feel that I am a wretch. Come on in, and dance this reel with me, and I’ll never speak of it again,—at least, for a long time. Don’t you hear them playing “Lady Anne Lindsay”? it’s grand.’

Sheila smiled, and put her hand on his arm again.

‘Before we go in, Alastair,’ she said, in a low voice, as they came near the open door, ‘will you tell me if it is true that Fergus Macleod is not behaving himself in Edinburgh?’

'Poor fellow! he's awfully down in the mouth, and perhaps he *has* gone a little off the straight; but he'll never do anything very bad,' said Alastair, with a manly kindness which showed his true, honest heart. 'Don't vex yourself about him, Sheila, and don't mind what I said. I—I forgot about Fergus Macleod.'





CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE LAST NIGHT OF THE YEAR.

The price one pays for pride is mountain high,
There is a curse beyond the rack of death,
The curse of a high spirit, famishing
Because all earth but sickens it.

BAILEY.



T was the last night of the year, a night of blinding snowdrift, in which it was unsafe to be out of doors. The wind was sweeping up Glenquaich with a terrific force, and howling round Shonnen with many an eerie, uncanny noise. By her melancholy hearth, with her arms folded across her breast, sat Ellen Macleod alone, thinking of her son. The last night of the year!—other mothers had their bairns gathered about the hearth; even the poorest household in the Glen made some attempt at social, happy renunion on the last night of the year. But in the house of Shonnen that desolate and miserable woman was alone with her anxiety and her regrets. She wished she had been less hard with her one son. She thought if he would but come in, she would give him a welcome such as he had never received. She even planned a letter she should write on the morrow, asking him to come home, and telling him she would no longer insist that he should follow in the path she had marked out. It had been a long, dreary day; it was even then

only half-past seven, and each minute seemed like an hour, not only to her, but to poor Jessie Mackenzie, whose service at Shonnen was rather a trial for a girl who had been brought up among eight brothers and sisters, and loved cheerful company. But it was an easy place, and she had got into Mrs. Macleod's way, and was, on the whole, comfortable enough. She was trying to make herself happy in the kitchen, by the side of the blazing peat fire, finishing a brilliant purple 'Tam o' Shanter' for the shepherd at Garrows, who was her 'lad,' but who was strictly forbidden to come and see her at Shonnen. Their only chance of meeting was on Sunday nights, as her mistress could not control her when she was out of the house.

About ten minutes to eight, both women were startled by a loud and continuous knocking at the door. Both sprang up, and ran out into the dimly-lighted hall, where they looked at each other in amazement, which was partly apprehension.

Indeed, Jessie Mackenzie's teeth were chattering in her head, but Mrs. Macleod was neither a timid nor a nervous woman.

'Oh, ma'am, dinna open the door! It'll be the tinks,' pleaded the girl tremblingly. 'There was a great tribe o' them cam' up the Sma' Glen the day, an' we hinna a man in the house.'

'Who's there?' asked Mrs. Macleod, approaching the door, which, however, she did not unlock.

'It's me; confound you! can't you let me in?' said a thick, angry voice, which, however, she instantly recognised; and in a moment the door was flung open, and the son of the house, covered with snow from head to foot, came in. They did not notice anything peculiar in his gait or manner just at first. Jessie, with whom he was a great favourite, ran for the carpet switch to sweep the snow from his coat and boots, but his mother was almost speechless with amazement.

'Why in the world have you come home to-day, in a storm like this, too?' she asked. 'How did you get up? Where have you come from?'

'From Edinburgh, of course,' he answered, quite rudely, in a manner so different from his own that his mother started.

He threw his wet coat and hat on the hall floor, and marched into the dining-room, his snowy feet making wet marks on the carpet all the way. His mother noticed then that he seemed to walk unsteadily, and that there was something strange about him altogether. An awful fear took possession of her; but she was equal to the occasion. She stepped forward, and drew to the dining-room door, just as the maid came out of the kitchen with the brush and a towel in her hand.

'Take Mr. Fergus's coat and hat to the kitchen and shake them, Jessie, and put on the kettle,' said Ellen Macleod, without a tremor in her voice. 'You can come for the boots when I ring. He is very tired, I see. He has walked from Dunkeld.'

Jessie, suspecting nothing, proceeded to obey her mistress, who then went into the dining-room. Fergus had a chair planted straight before the fire, and the soles of his boots stuck against the red-hot bars of the grate. The water was running off them on to the polished steel ash-pan, and a cloud of steam was rising about him. His mother went straight to the hearth, and surveyed him a moment in silence. What she endured during that instant was fearful.

'Well?' he said, with a rude laugh. 'Will you know me again? Get out the bottle, and let us drink to the New Year. It'll soon be here.'

She turned her head away, for her face was grey with the sharp pain at her heart. It was a physical pain, brought on by the shock. Was that her boy—that pale, haggard, dissipated-looking young man, with the bleared red eyes and hollow cheeks, his hand shaking with nervousness as he clutched the back of the chair? Had she driven him to this?

'Get out the bottle,' he reiterated, giving the fire a kick with his singed boot. 'It's a sorry welcome for a fellow after a ten-mile walk. What are you staring at?'

'At you. I can *not* believe that you are my son,' came at length from between her pale lips.

'Fact, though,—him in the flesh. He needs a little spirit, though,' he said, with a hideous leer. 'Is there anything in the sideboard?'

The shock of agony over,—for it was agony to that proud woman to see her noble son thus debased,—her temper rose. Had she been wise, she would have held her peace, but in her state of mind at the time, perhaps it was too much to expect from her.

‘What do you mean,’ she demanded fiercely, ‘coming home to disgrace me in this state? The stories I have heard of your misdeeds are all too true, I see; but I hoped you would have respect enough for me to come home sober, at least.’

‘Draw it mild, old lady; you should be thankful I’m here at all. I had a job getting up that beastly road, I can tell you. Fetch out the bottle, I say, and give us a pull for my pains.’

He rose, and made a move towards the sideboard; but in an instant his mother had turned the key, and slipped it into her pocket. Fergus was in a half-maudlin state, too drunk, indeed, to be angry.

‘I’ll get my coat. There’s a nip or two left in it yet,’ he said, opening the door. ‘It’s away! Here, Jessie Mackenzie! bring that coat, and be smart about it,’ he cried at the top of his voice.

Before his mother could countermand the order, Jessie, in amazement, came hurrying out with the coat.

Forgetful of everything but her determination to keep the stuff from him, Ellen Macleod took the bottle from the pocket, and threw it on the stone floor, where it shattered to atoms. Then of course Fergus swore, and, turning open the outer door, he darted out.

‘I’ll get it from Uncle Graham at Dalmore,’ they heard him mutter, and the next moment he was lost in the darkness and swirl of the drift.

A low cry, which Jessie never forgot, broke from Ellen Macleod’s lips, and she darted after him, but was almost blinded in a moment.

‘Come back, ma’am! oh, come back! Ye’ll be buried and killed!’ cried Jessie, shaking with excitement and terror, for such a thing had never happened in the quiet house of Shonnon before.

Ellen Macleod did not go far. She had not lost her senses

quite, and she saw that it was useless. She came back into the house, and shut the door with a hand which did not falter; but her face was awful to see.

'He has gone to his death, Jessie Mackenzie; no human being can seek him on a night like this. God help him and me!'

Then Jessie fell to weeping, and even offered to struggle up to the inn and get men to look for him, but her mistress only shook her head, and, passing into the dining-room, again shut herself in. Jessie Mackenzie wandered up and down the hall, wringing her hands in misery, trembling still from the excitement. The whole thing had happened so suddenly, and had passed so quickly, that it was like a dream.

Ellen Macleod was alone with her agony, and it did its work. Her face worked convulsively, her lips were bleeding with her effort to keep them still, her hands shook, nay, her whole proud figure trembled as if it had received a shock. Once a long moan broke from her lips, and then, as if unable to bear the tumult of her soul, she knelt down by the table, and pressed her brow upon the hard edge until it made a deep red mark. But she did not feel that it hurt her. In moments of such intense mental anguish the physical is as nothing. God was dealing sharply with this strange woman. Hard of heart, she needed a hard discipline. Would it avail? Would it fulfil its desired end? In that position she knelt, battling with her pain, until the dead ashes dropped from the grate, and the lamp went out with a feeble flicker, leaving the room cold and dark. In that position the grey dawn of the New Year's morning found her.

Miss Murray Macdonald had returned to Dalmore on the 29th of December; they could not persuade her to remain for the New Year's festivities at Murrayshaugh. She left Miss Gordon at the manse, however, to spend New Year with her family, and came up alone on a snell, bitter afternoon, when a few stray snowflakes were scudding before the north wind. If Yule was green, it bade fair to be a white Hogmanay.

Sheila had enjoyed herself thoroughly at Murrayshaugh, but she was unfeignedly glad to be home. Dalmore might be a burden on her shoulders, but she loved the place with a surpassing love. Though she was so young, and had a bright, gay, happy spirit, she was never dull, even when alone in her rambling old house. She had her pony and her rambles out of doors, her books, painting, and music in the house, therefore time did not hang heavy on her hands. She was neither indolent nor difficult to please. Cameron, the housekeeper, who adored her, said she was the most industrious young lady *she* had ever seen, and Cameron had spent all her life in service.

On the last night of the year Sheila was alone in the drawing-room. Tory lay snugly curled up in a corner of the couch, with his presuming little head on a crimson satin hand-painted cushion. Tory was undoubtedly a spoiled dog, but he was very, very old now, and his young mistress indulged him to the top of his bent. On the hearth-rug lay a noble staghound, who, it must be confessed, was a formidable rival to Tory. He was a gift from the Murray-naugh boys, and rejoiced in the name of Whig. In Miss Murray Macdonald's drawing-room politics were at a discount, for Whig and Tory both agreed. It was nine o'clock, and Sheila began to yawn a little over her work, and to wish the supper tray would come in. Suddenly Tory pricked up his ears, and Whig, lifting up his grand head, sent forth one deep, warning bark. Sheila rose in some surprise. They kept early hours at Dalmore; she fancied the doors would be all locked, and some of the servants already in bed. There was not a sound to be heard; even the wind seemed to breathe quietly round Dalmore, and drifting snow makes no noise. But presently there was a quick knock at the drawing-room door, and Cameron, looking somewhat scared, came in.

'What is it, Cameron?' asked Sheila, fearing something, she scarcely knew what.

'Miss Sheila, a strange thing has happened. Mr. Fergus Macleod has come, and'—

'What does he want? Why did you not bring him up at once? Tell him to come up now, Cameron,' said Sheila

quickly; and the sweet colour flushed all her fair face with a crimson glow.

'Oh, I couldn't, Miss Sheila. He's not right, poor young gentleman!'

'What is the matter with him? I'll go and see him. Is he in the library?' said Sheila, with an apprehensive look. She could not understand the hesitation in the housekeeper's manner, and it irritated her.

'O no, you mustn't go down,' said Cameron, laying a detaining hand on the arm of her young mistress. 'He has had too much drink, I think, Miss Sheila, and he has come seeking his Uncle Graham, he says. I tried to persuade him to go quietly away, but he won't; he is in the library, sitting quietly, thinking I have gone to fetch the Laird.'

Sheila grew white to the lips, and began to tremble. The housekeeper saw her put a check on herself, and clench her hands to keep them still. She turned her large, earnest eyes full on the housekeeper's face, with a half-resolute, half-pathetic look.

'I shall go down. Come with me, Cameron, but remain out of the room. Perhaps I may be able to make him go quietly away.'

She spoke with evident effort. She had received a shock which made her feel weak and ill. She could not believe it of Fergus. She wished to see for herself. Her tone was imperative; Cameron had never heard it more so, and she turned silently and opened the door.

'Who let him in?' Sheila turned on the stairs to ask.

'I did, Miss Sheila. The girls are in bed, and Hamish dozing over the fire.'

'Nobody saw him but you, then?'

'Nobody, Miss Sheila.'

'I am glad of that,' said Sheila simply; and the housekeeper wiped a tear from her own eyes.

Sheila did not hesitate at the library door, but turned the handle, and went in with swift, unflinching steps. The library was used as a dining-room when the ladies were alone, and the fire burned in it all day in winter. Cameron had turned up

the lamp, and there was Fergus, sitting on the corner of the sofa, with his head laid down on the pillow, sound asleep. Tired with his fight through the snowdrift, the warm air of the room had overpowered him, and he had succumbed the moment he sat down. Sheila stood a moment by the table, and looked at him. She was very straight and erect, and her face was perfectly white. The look upon it might have recalled his wandering senses, but he seemed perfectly unconscious. Sheila turned about at length, and, going to the door, beckoned to the housekeeper, who was in the hall. Then both left the room, and Sheila, undoing the bolts of the hall door, tried to look out, but the soft snow swept in upon her, and a sudden wind blast nearly blew out the hall lamp.

'Shut the door, Cameron, and put up the bolts,' said Sheila decidedly. 'No one can leave Dalmore to-night. What are we to do?'

'It would be a cruel shame to set him out alone. He would never reach Shonnon alive, Miss Sheila, but would only creep into a dyke-side, and fall into a sleep he would never waken from,' said Cameron. 'And if we set Hamish with him, the whole parish will have the story before dinner-time to-morrow.'

'Then he must stay here,' said Sheila. Her eyes were glowering. In spite of her perfect calmness, she was labouring under the most intense excitement.

'I'll tell ye what, Miss Sheila, I'll build up the fire in the library, and let him abe. He'll tak' no harm, poor lad! They say Providence takes care o' bairns an' foolish lads like him,' said Cameron. 'I'll lie down myself in the bed in the Laird's room, an' I'll hear him if he moves. And I promise ye I'll get him away from Dalmore in the mornin' afore there's a movement in the house.'

'I'll see him before he goes. I shall not be asleep,' said Sheila. 'Be kind to him, Cameron, for my sake.'

'Bless ye, my bairn! an' him an' a', said Cameron fervently. 'He'll be a braw man for a' this yet. It'll maybe be the makin' o' him to hae sleepit this night in Dalmore.'

Sheila smiled a wan smile, and crept away upstairs. She

passed by the drawing-room, where the dogs were whining at the door, and went along the corridor to her mother's room. Two hearts were breaking that night for Fergus Macleod's misdoing.

Sheila threw herself across the bed, and her grief found vent in one low, passionate cry,—

‘Oh, mamma! mamma!’



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her's room.
s Macleod's

found vent



CHAPTER XXXIV.

NEW YEAR'S MORN.

For mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face ;
And love the human form divine,
And peace the human dress.

WILLIAM BLACK.



FERGUS MACLEOD slept soundly until four o'clock in the morning. Cameron, sitting with a plaid round her in the Laird's arm-chair in the adjoining room, heard him move, and, the bedroom door being ajar, she could see him quite well. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared round him. He did not seem to realize at first where he was. There was a glowing fire in the wide grate, and the lamp was burning on the table. The room had never looked more home-like and familiar, but what room was it? But for the weight of her sorrow and anxiety both for him and her mistress, the housekeeper could have laughed at the look of utter helplessness and perplexity in his face. He got up at length, shook himself, and took a turn round the room. Then he stopped straight opposite the fireplace, and Cameron saw him fix his eyes on the portrait of his uncle's wife, which hung above the mantel-shelf. These sweet, serious eyes seemed to be bent upon him in mild, sorrowing surprise. He started, and drew his hand quickly across his brow.

'Aunt Edith!' he said. 'Heavens! I am at Dalmore! What does it mean?'

The housekeeper rose, and made a movement with her chair to attract his attention before she entered his presence.

'Mr. Fergus,' she said gently, 'sit down, and I'll explain to you how you came here.'

He looked at her in dumb amazement, and then sat down as obediently as a child. He was quite sober now, but he did not realize his situation. He felt like a man awaking from some bewildering dream.

'Don't you remember coming up last night, Mr. Fergus, and asking for your Uncle Graham?'

He shook his head.

'I don't remember anything but getting out at Dunkeld station, and ploughing up the road through the snow,' he said, trying to make memory perform her function. 'When did I come?'

'At nine o'clock.'

'Were you anywhere else on the road?'

'Yes, I was at home,' he said, starting up. 'I remember my mother, and she was frightfully angry. Cameron, I was drunk! What state was I in when I came here?'

'You had had too much. I saw it at once, Mr. Fergus,' said Cameron, feeling an intense pity for him. The awakening was a fearful experience for Fergus Macleod. The veins on his broad white brow were swollen like knotted cords; the perspiration stood in great beads on his face.

'Tell me all about it, Cameron. What did I do? Was I wild? Did I make any disturbance?'

'O no, none. Nobody saw you but Miss Sheila and me.'

She told him purposely. She wished him to suffer; to have his wholesome lesson without alleviation. It might, as she had said, be his salvation.

'Did *she* see me? O my God!'

There was no irreverence in the exclamation. It was wrung from him by keen mental anguish. Before Cameron could reply, the door into the hall was softly opened, and Sheila herself stole in. She had never undressed. She still wore her warm grey tweed gown, and a white linen collar, fastened by

a big purple cairngorm at her throat. The linen was not whiter than her face. She had kept her vigil all the night long in her mother's room. It was directly above the library, and, in the absolute stillness of the house, she had easily heard the sound of their voices below. It could not reach the other inmates of the house, who were sleeping in the remote wing. When her young mistress entered, Cameron slipped out. His eyes were wet, her heart sore, for these two young creatures, who loved each other, and who met in such strange and sad circumstances.

'I thought I should like to see you, Fergus,' Sheila said, 'before you went away.'

Her voice was of surpassing sweetness, her accent gentle and kind, but with a ring of mournfulness in it. Perhaps her girlish idol was shattered; and that, to a sensitive heart, is something of a trial. He swung round, gave her one startled look, and then, flinging himself on the couch again, gave way to tears. They were tears of bitterest penitence and shame. The noise of his sobbing disturbed Sheila. She walked over to the fireplace, and, leaning her arm on the oak shelf above it, stood very still. Her tears were all shed. It was as if the face of the mother in the picture on the wall was moved with compassion for them both. The mild, beautiful eyes seemed almost to speak. No doubt her spirit was there. Sheila felt comforted and strengthened to go through this ordeal. She had something to say to Fergus. She felt that God would guide her tongue.

At last he grew calmer, and stood up, and looked at the slight figure of the young girl by the hearth.

'I shall go away, Sheila, without asking you to forgive me. I shall never forgive myself. I have disgraced my own name, my uncle's memory, and your home. Good-bye.'

He gave his head a slight inclination, and turned to go; but Sheila's look held him back.

'Not yet. I have something to say to you, Fergus. Why should I not forgive you? I will not say you have not done wrong, but I cannot let you go feeling as you do at this moment. I could not do it to a stranger, least of all to *you*.'

'You are too kind, but your kindness cannot lighten my burden of shame, Sheila. As I live, I know not what tempted me to degrade myself before *you*,' he said, with passion.

'Better to me than to strangers, Fergus,' she said sadly; but the kind look never left her face. 'I will tell you I was not so much surprised, because I had heard you had gone off the straight path a little. But you will find it again, and walk stedfastly in it, for your own sake and for mine.'

'For yours? Then you do not altogether hate and despise me, Sheila?' cried the unhappy young man, with a gleam of hope in his melancholy eyes.

'Despise and hate you, after all that is past, Fergus?' said Sheila reproachfully. 'I cannot, cannot do that; for I feel—indeed I do, and it is well-nigh breaking my heart—that had I not robbed you of your inheritance, you would have been a different man. You would have been reigning here, the honoured and beloved Laird of Dalmore.'

These words caused Fergus Macleod the deepest surprise and concern. He saw how deeply Sheila felt what she was saying, and again he cursed his own folly. He saw that she took blame to herself for his sin. He could have knelt at her feet and besought her forgiveness anew, but the look on her face deterred him.

'Hush, hush!' he said hurriedly. 'Do you think I have ever grudged Dalmore to you? When I hear how they speak your name, and see what you have done for the place and the people, I am thankful that it is in your hands and not in mine. When I leave here, Sheila, you shall never see me again, but in all your efforts for the people's good, in all your generous, noble kindness, be sure that no blessing or congratulation can be truer than that of Fergus Macleod, unworthy though he be.'

There was a flush now upon Sheila's cheek, and her eye filled with apprehension.

'Where are you going, Fergus?' she asked, somewhat falteringly.

'After last night, I hardly think my mother will care to keep me at home,' replied he, with a slight shudder. 'She

will be glad to send me where all the scapegoats are sent,—across the sea.'

'You seem proud of your character,' said Sheila, with slightly curling lip, for her righteous anger rose at his tone, which did no honour to his manhood. But suddenly her mood changed; her face became beautiful with the tenderness of her heart; her eye shone with a high resolve. The time had come for her to exercise the woman's privilege, not only to comfort, but to spur on to highest endeavour; and so her childhood went away for ever from Sheila Macdonald.

'Fergus, I will not say you must not go,—nay, I think now it would be better to break all the old ties, and begin anew. Promise me that, for the sake of the old time, you will begin anew, and try to live your life nobly. I have expected so much. I do expect it still from you. There will never be to me a second Fergus Macleod. Don't disappoint me. There is no grand achievement or noble height which I have not believed you could reach. Only on condition that you will fulfil my dreams will I say good-bye, and bid you God speed!'

Surely the words were Heaven-given. They infused new life into Fergus Macleod; they showed him the possibilities of life. They even assured him that one fall need not mean constant grovelling, that hope had a benison for him yet. In a word, they made him a man. He drew himself up; a light came into his blue eye something like the flashing light of old; he gave his mouth a determined curve. Sheila saw that he was saved.

'So help me God, I will!' he said, and these words were a vow. 'I promise to you, before God, that from this day I am a different man. In addition to all you have done for others, Sheila, you have saved me. Yes, as I live, I believe had you treated me differently, my shame and horror would have sent me straight to destruction.'

'No, no; you are not wholly bad,' said Sheila, with a slight smile, which was more pathetic than her former deep gravity. 'Go, then, Fergus; some day, not far distant, I trust, I shall be proud of my friend.'

She extended her hand, but he shook his head.

'I am not worthy to touch it,' he said. 'If that same day ever comes, Sheila, I hope I shall be able to stand in your presence without shame, and tell you what I owe to you.'

She took a step forward then, and, seeing he was going, followed him out to the door. When he set it open, they saw that the storm had ceased. The lowering clouds were drifting across the sky, but right above where they stood there was a clear patch of blue, in which many stars were shining.

'Stars of promise,' Sheila said; and then they stood for a moment in a silence which touched them both with solemnity. The past half-hour had been one of keen tension for both, and now the shadow, perhaps, of an eternal parting was upon them.

It was not wonderful that Fergus had nothing to say now, still less that Sheila's lips should be silent. There had been too much between them, to part with words of commonplace farewell.

'It will be dawn soon. I must go,' said Fergus; and their eyes met. In that look the heart of each was revealed to the other. Sheila turned about, and, gliding into the house, closed the door. Then Fergus Macleod knelt down on the snow-covered doorstep, and prayed. When he rose from his knees, he walked away from the house with a step which had resolution and hope in it. In his despair and disappointment he had tried the prodigal's husks, and had now come back, clothed and in his right mind, to the right way, which, with the help of God, he would never leave again.

That night had passed strangely at Shonnen Lodge. Mrs. Macleod was shut in the dining-room, Jessie Mackenzie keeping a vigil by the kitchen fire. She had slipped out before midnight, and unlocked the front door, so that if the wanderer should return he would gain admittance at once. She was too frightened to sleep. At five o'clock she began to move about and attend to her work. More than once she went to the dining-room door, but always came trembling back from it again. I do not know what she feared. The stillness was like death. She felt that she could not go into that room until it

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was daylight. Possibly her movements aroused her mistress, for, after a time, to her intense relief, Jessie heard a step in the dining-room. Then the door was opened, and Mrs. Macleod came through to the kitchen. She was like a spectre. Jessie almost screamed at sight of her. Her hair was quite white, and her face pale as that of the dead.

'There has been no word, I suppose, Jessie?' she said, in a cold, passionless voice.

'No, ma'am. Oh, how cold you look! Come and warm yourself at the fire; I kept it in all night.'

'You should have been in your bed,' said Mrs. Macleod quietly; but she obeyed the kind request, and stood by the fire a moment, warming her chilled, blue fingers at the cheerful glow. 'It is after five, I see. You can light the dining-room fire; I think it has gone out. I shall go upstairs and lie down for a little.'

Her voice sounded low and somewhat broken in its tone. The hopelessness of it struck Jessie, though she was not a close observer. Her kind heart was instantly touched.

'Sit down here, ma'am, or I make ye a cup of tea, and when ye are drinking it I'll make a fire in your room and put the bottle in the bed. See, the kettle's boilin'.'

'You are a good girl, Jessie. Very well, I will sit down. Yes, I am very cold,' said Ellen Macleod, shivering from head to foot. Jessie was seriously alarmed. She wished it was daylight. The things that were happening at Shonnon were too much for her to cope with alone. But who could she send for? Her mistress had no friends. Jessie was very active. In an incredibly short time she had a nice cup of tea for her mistress, who took it gratefully, and sipped it with evident relish. But her face had still that worn look; her eyes were dry and glittering. She was thinking of her boy, lying among the snow-drifts—dead, and she had driven him to it! Poor, proud, breaking heart! its punishment was very great. Jessie Mackenzie was up in the bedroom, busying herself for the comfort of her distressed mistress, when the outer door was opened, and some one came in,—some one with a firm, steady, manly step. The foot sought the dining-room, and then came

striding into the kitchen. Ellen Macleod let her tea-cup fall down on the stone floor, but sat perfectly still. Then the figure approached her, and knelt down by her side on the floor, and an arm was thrown about her where she sat, and a voice filled her ears—her own boy's familiar voice, though broken and trembling in its tone.

'Mother!' it said, 'mother, forgive me! I believe God has.'

But there was no answer. Then, looking up, he saw the white hair, the haggard, pain-lined face, the agony-dimmed eyes, and knew what he had done.

'Mother, mother! speak to me! I am your son. Speak to me, and forgive me!' he pleaded. Then he looked at her and wondered, for her lips parted, and the smile on her face was to him a glimpse of heaven. She laid her hand on his brow; she passed it round his neck, and bent her own cheek until it rested on his bright hair. And so mother and son in name became mother and son in heart. God had spoken, and not in vain, to Ellen Macleod.





CHAPTER XXXV.

SIGNS OF EVIL.

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain?

Hamlet.



AT twelve o'clock on the last night of the year, old Janet Menzies died in her cottage at Achnafauld. The end was not unexpected, for she had been rapidly sinking since the winter. So Malcolm and Katie were left quite alone. There had not been such perfect confidence and affection between them for some time; not, indeed, since the night Angus M'Bean had walked home with Katie from Shian. Malcolm's jealous suspicion, being once roused, slept no more. He watched Katie perpetually until the factor's son went back to college; but he took no thought that while he was busy on the croft, Katie might be reading, ay, and writing love-letters too.

The Hogmanay storm had rendered the roads impassable, and it became a question how old Janet's burying was to take place at Shian. Both the roads beyond Achnafauld were level with the dykes, and the snow was so soft and 'pouthery' that it was impossible to walk on it without sinking. It was decided at length to carry her over the frozen loch, and then cut a way through the drift as well as possible up to the grave-

yard. Most of the Fauld folks buried at Shian, though the churchyard at Amulree was nearer, and had a better road to it. Old Janet had insisted at the last that, whatever the state of the roads, they should bury her beside her father and mother in Shian.

'If ye tak' me to Amulree,' she had said, shaking her skinny forefinger at the minister and at Malcolm as they stood by her bed the morning before she died, 'I'll no' lie. My licht 'll burn in the kirkyaird or ye lift me.' It was firmly believed in the Glen that when the deceased had died with an uneasy conscience, or if the relatives had done anything to thwart the last wishes, the corpse candles burned in the grave, a sure sign that the spirit was haunting the place in a fever of unrest. So, at all hazards, Janet must be taken to Shian on the day of the funeral. Sheila had her pony saddled, and managed to ride through the drift to the Fauld. Since she had entered into possession at Dalmore, she had taken a part in all the joys and sorrows of her people, and she felt that Katie would be very desolate after they all left the house. She arrived in time for the service, and she was greatly impressed thereby. It was short and simple, yet very solemn. Mr. Macfarlane's earnest words sank into her heart. When it was all over, six stalwart men formed a sort of litter with their arms, and then bore the coffin out by the door. Blind Rob was ready with his pipes, for he played a pibroch for all his neighbours at the burials, and so the melancholy train went down the path, which had been swept clear to the loch. Sheila went out to the back of the house, and watched the strange procession winding its way across the whitened landscape, all the trappings of woe seeming darker and more striking in contrast with the spotless purity of the snow. The sky was leaden-hued, and seemed to hang low over the castle, the air was soundless and heavy, and Rob's pibroch seemed to fill the Glen with its mournful wailing. Altogether, it was an impressive sight, and one which Sheila would not readily forget. When she went back to the house, Katie was crying by the fire. As she looked at her, Sheila could not but think how bonnie and sweet she looked in her black flock, which seemed to set off the fair whiteness of her face.

'Don't cry, Katie. Aunt Janet was an old, old woman, you know, and she was quite ready to go. Let us think rather that she is free from all her pain now,' said Sheila softly; but, before Katie had time to answer, the door was softly opened, and young Angus M'Bean looked in.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Murray Macdonald,' he said shamefacedly. 'I thought Katie would be alone, or I would not have come.'

'Come in, come in. I am just going,' said Sheila, with a slight smile. 'Katie, are you not going to speak to Mr. M'Bean?'

Katie's face was as red as the peat glow, but Sheila saw that her eyes brightened. Involuntarily she looked at Angus M'Bean. She wondered just then what his evident love for Katie might mean. She could almost have asked him there and then. Had she been ten years older she certainly would have asked him. But she was fain to think the best of him. And it was a good sign that he did not seem put out at finding her in the cottage. So she bade them both good-bye, and rode away, leaving Angus to comfort Katie in his own way.

'Ye'll need to go away before Malcolm comes home,' said Katie, after they had talked of a great many things very interesting to themselves, but not of special import to us.

'No, Katie; I'm going to wait till Malcolm comes back. Miss Murray Macdonald saw me here, and all the neighbours know I am in, and I'm not going to run away from him,' said Angus firmly.

'He'll be awfu' angry,' said Katie nervously. 'He said once that if he saw me speaking to you again, he'd kill us both.'

'Let him try it,' said Angus lightly. 'Katie, I can't bear to go back to Edinburgh and leave you with Malcolm. He'll not be good to you.'

'Oh, he's weel enough when he disna ken nor hear anything about you,' said Katie, with a sigh; for, indeed, her heart *did* fail her a little at the prospect of her life alone in the house with Malcolm. He was so dreadfully changed.

'How dour he is, Katie! He keeps up a grudge for ever,'

said Angus presently. 'I told him once that I wished I had never tormented or told tales on him when we were all at Peter Crerar's school, and asked him to let bygones be bygones, but he just glowered at me, and said he would ca' me into the loch. I told him he was too ready speaking about the loch, and lifting stones and graips to folk, and, faith, he got into such a terrible passion that I was glad to get out of the road. We'll need to marry without *his* consent, Katie.'

'Ay, an' gang faur, faur awa', if we ever dae,' said Katie, in a low voice, for a constant dread was upon her. Although Angus M'Bean had really tried to make manly amends for his past persecution, Malcolm would receive none of his advances. He seemed to hate the whole household at Auchloy with a mortal hatred. He even seemed to be soured, too, against his very neighbours in the Fauld. The only person who could call forth the kindly impulses of his heart was Sheila. It is not too much to say that he worshipped her with a dumb, faithful worship, something like the blind, unquestioning attachment of a dog to its master. It was grey dark when the mourners returned from the funeral, and when Malcolm came striding into the house,—a strange-looking figure in his ill-fitting black clothes,—he could not at first distinguish who it was sitting opposite Katie at the fireside.

'It's me, Malcolm,' said Angus presently; for he wished to assert a kind of right to Katie before her brother, in order that the future might be easier for her.

'Oh, it's you, is't?' said Malcolm quietly enough; but Katie, who could read every expression on his face, saw his nostrils dilate and the veins rise on his brow, as they had done of late on the smallest provocation, thus indicating that his nervous system was too easily excited. 'Well, if it's you, there's the door.'

'Tuts, man! don't be so snuffy. Let me sit and crack a little; I'm going away the day after to-morrow,' said Angus, in the same hearty tone.

Malcolm set the door wide to the wall, and then, with one swing of his powerful right arm, he swooped down upon the factor's son, and whisked him out of the place, locking the door

behind him. Then he turned to Katie with blazing eyes, and said sullenly, 'If ye say a word, or if I see or hear o' ye speakin' to that deevil again, I'll turn ye oot efter him. The hoose's mine noo, mind that!'

Katie began to cry again, and crouched by the ingle-neuk in perfect misery.

Finding himself thus summarily ejected from the house, Angus M'Bean stood for a moment undecided what to do. It was fearful to leave Katie there with that madman, for such Angus held him to be, and yet he was very powerless. He must go away in the meantime, but of one thing he was certain, that he could not and would not leave Katie at Malcolm's mercy very long. He walked slowly along a beaten footpath to Auchloy, so slowly that it was pitch dark when he got home. His sisters were spending the New Year at Crieff, and his father and mother were having an early tea in the dining-room when he went in. The factor's brow was as black as thunder; his son saw at once that there was something seriously disturbing him.

'Got your courting done, eh?' he asked, with a bitter sneer, as Angus drew in his chair to the table, and asked his mother for a cup of tea.

'Maybe, and maybe no'; that's my business,' he answered sharply enough, for his father's tone irritated him. He was vexed and perplexed, at any rate, and did not feel equal to any more censure of his actions. Malcolm's summary treatment rankled in his mind.

'It's a queer time to court just after the coffin's carried out of the house,' continued the factor sourly. 'I wonder you didna think shame, if she didna. Ye might have let the auld wife be cauld in her grave before ye began.'

'Any word from the lassies to-day, mother?' asked Angus, turning his back not very dutifully on his father; whereupon that worthy's anger got the better of his judgment.

'Had I kent ye were in the hoose wi' the lassie when I gaed by, I wad hae come in, and laid my whip aboot yer lugs, my man!' he said loudly. 'And Miss Murray Macdonald saw ye too, that was more.'

'She was in when I was in,' said Angus dryly. 'So ye haven't got the news quite correctly.'

'Weel, whether or no', I want to know what ye mean. Are ye courtin' Miss Murray Macdonald or Katie Menzies? for it canna be them baith.'

'Then it's not Miss Murray Macdonald,' said Angus doggedly, determined to make a clean breast of it, his mind being made up to marry Katie.

'Then is't Katie Menzies?'

'Yes.'

'An' are ye going to marry her?'

'Yes.'

'After a' I've done for ye? D'ye hear that, Mrs. M'Bean? Your braw son's gaun to marry Katie Menzies—crazy Malcolm's sister.'

Mrs. M'Bean never spoke, but poured out another cup of tea to steady her nerves. But she cast a look of sympathy upon her son, which let him see plainly what *her* opinion was. The factor was too angry to notice it. He was frightfully disappointed. He had built up a fine castle for his one son, and here it had fallen about his ears.

'Angus M'Bean, are ye in your right mind? That's what I want to ken. It seems to me that the mad Menzies hae made ye about as daft as they are.'

Angus smiled. He did not stand in awe of his father, and, I fear, had not that respect for him with which a wise father inspires his son.

'Maybe,' he said carelessly. 'Mad or not mad, I'll marry nobody but Katie Menzies, do or say what you like.'

The factor clenched his hand, and brought it down on the table with a thump, which set the tea-cups rattling against each other, and knocked over the milk jug into the jelly glass.

'If ye marry her, I'll disinherit ye! D'ye hear me? I'll disinherit ye, Angus M'Bean!'

'I can't help that. I can work for myself.'

'Hear him! after all I've spent on him!' cried the factor, as if adjuring a listening audience. 'Ye owe me hunders o' pounds! Hunders, I say, but hunders 'll no' pay't.'

'Well, if you look at it in that way, father, you can make out a bill, and I'll look upon it as a debt,' said young Angus quietly. 'But you've only educated me, and I thought it was a father's duty to give his bairns the best education in his power.'

'Had I but kent that ye wad make sic a ruin o' yer life, I wad hae shippit ye awa' to Canada wi' the cottars!' cried the factor. 'Laddie, ye had a splendid future before ye, an estate and a grand wife lyin' to your very haund, an ye hae thrown it away; but a judgment will come upon ye for it, I hope and pray.'

'You speak very surely, father. I am as certain as I am sitting here, that though I were to court Miss Murray Macdonald for a thousand years she would never marry me. She thinks herself far better than me; besides, I would rather work for my wife than take everything from her.'

'Hear til him! He's speakin' oot o' a book noo,' said the factor sarcastically. 'Mrs. McBean, can you no' speak a word to put this rascal by his folly?'

'I'm glad he's that sensible, Angus,' was his spouse's unexpected reply. 'And as for Katie Menzies, she's a bonnie, sweet lassie; ye micht hae dune waur, far waur, Angus, my man. And ye hae baith my blessin', whatever yer faither may say. There's faur owre muckle tryin' to be big an' grand noo. Puir folk's faur the happiest. For my pairt, I hae never kent muckle ease o' mind sin' I cam' doon the Glen to Auchloy. So take ye heart, my man, an' work wi' yer haunds for Katie, an' the Lord wull bless ye baith.'

It was a long speech for Mrs. McBean, and had her feelings not been wrought up to a certain pitch, she would not have dared to utter it before her lord and master, who ruled her in all things. But it was a matter of conscience this, and Mrs. McBean was a good as well as a kind woman. She was profoundly thankful that her son had at length taken so firm a stand for the right. Many a salt tear she had shed for him in his more degenerate days, before Katie's sweet influence had wrought in him for good.

Mr. McBean cast upon his wife a look of withering scorn,

and, with his head in the air, marched out of the room, as if he felt it impossible to breathe in the same atmosphere with them.

He never alluded to it again, but there was a marked coldness in his demeanour towards his son during the brief time he remained at home. Angus went away without a word; his classes were taken out at college for the spring session, so he might as well take advantage of them. But he determined that, in addition to working very hard at his books in Edinburgh, he would keep a look-out for a situation as under-factor, and that if he were successful in obtaining his desire, he would marry Katie without delay, and make a home for himself and for her.



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CHAPTER XXXVI.

MY WIFE!

My wife's a winsome wee thing,
This sweet wee wife o' mine.



FERGUS MACLEOD went back to college the day after Angus M'Bean left Auchloy. His class fees were paid up till Easter, and he could not idle the spring months at home. It was finally settled that he and his mother should sail for Quebec by the first steamer which made the voyage from Glasgow after the ice broke up on the St. Lawrence. Wherever the boy was would be home and paradise now for Ellen Macleod. He warned her of the hardships, but she said she would make them easier for him.

Seeing that her heart was set upon it, Fergus said no more. The new mother he had found was so dear to him, that he could not bear the thought of parting with her. It had been a strange experience for them both. It almost seemed as if they had made a new and delightful acquaintance with each other. His mother was now Fergus Macleod's sympathizer and confidante; to her he poured out all the miserable experiences of those winter months in Edinburgh, told all the idle dissipating of time and opportunity, the desecration of talent and privilege. And she did not blame,

but only bade him go on in a new and better way, and take courage. He had told her, the night before he left Shonnen, what had transpired at Dalmore, and when he spoke of Sheila, his mother knew by his hushed voice and full, earnest eye what she was to him. His dearest; and she, his mother, must henceforth be content to be second. But even that, in her new-found peace and happiness, seemed a little thing. She knew in her heart that Sheila was worthy the highest homage that Fergus or any man could give her. She even admitted to herself that Fergus was not worthy of her yet. The day might come when the desire of her heart, which she had long allowed to embitter her life, would be an accomplished fact, and Fergus would be Laird of Dalmore, and if not, he would fill some other sphere as worthily.

I hope this change for the better in Ellen Macleod does not savour of the miraculous or the impossible. In this history heretofore, the hardest, most unwomanly side of her character has constantly obtruded itself; but that, even in these hard days, she had had her moments of remorse, I cannot doubt. Many an unseen, unknown struggle must have taken place silently in her breast. But none of these had been strong enough to break down the barriers of her prejudice and pride. She needed a sharper discipline.

The fear of death had been upon her before her heart would melt; but, once broken down, she allowed the softer impulses of her nature to have fullest bent. She asked her son's forgiveness for her long harshness towards him very humbly, even with tears, and, having obtained it, alluded no more to that dark past. She sought rather to atone for it by making the present sweet, and the future bright. It was characteristic of the woman, and a hopeful sign, I think, that her repentance was real. There is no good, but rather harm, to be got in dwelling upon past evil of any kind. Let it be repented of sincerely and atoned for, if possible, then buried for ever. We are not called to abase ourselves perpetually to the memory of sins committed. Let our solemn striving after good be the earnest that we no longer desire evil.

After her boy went back to Edinburgh, Ellen Macleod set herself to make great preparations, in the way of sewing and knitting, for the future. Their intention was not known. They would keep their own counsel for a while. The weekly letter was now no hardship, but a joy, for Fergus to write. Sometimes two came instead of one, and his mother paid him back with interest. In these letters they spoke yet more freely and unrestrainedly to each other, and so the separation was shorn of half its bitterness.

Having learned that Fergus was in Edinburgh, Alastair sought him out in his old lodgings one evening in February. He found him hard at work among his books, trying to make up his lost ground.

'Hulloa, old man! turned a perfect model of industry, eh?' he cried, slapping his shoulder in his old hearty way. 'I wondered what had become of you. Never thought you had taken to grinding.'

'Time, don't you think?' asked Fergus, looking with a smile into Alastair's frank face. It *was* pleasant to see one's old chum, he thought, after their long estrangement.

'Are you going to stay a while, Alastair? Do, and I'll put up my books. I feel as if I had a thousand things to say to you.'

'Very likely, after the way you've persistently kept out of my road lately,' said Alastair, with a grin.

'Do you know, it's only four weeks to-day till the classes are up, and I haven't done a stroke of work?'

'It's hardly worth tackling to now. You look as if you needed a holiday already. Do you stew here for ever?'

'A good deal. Look at the time I lost in winter. It makes me savage to think of it. Alastair, why didn't you tell me what a fool I was?'

'Because you might, and probably would, have requested me to mind my own business,' said Alastair serenely. 'And I knew you wouldn't go too far. It's not in you.'

'I went far enough,' said Fergus, with clouding brow. 'Sit down, man. I suppose I may tell you now I'm off to Canada in April.'

‘Really?’

‘Fact. It’s the least I can do, isn’t it? to go out and see the place they’ve called after me. Fergus Creek is our destination.’

‘Our destination! Who is going with you?’

‘My mother.’

Alastair whistled,—not quite so much with surprise at the announcement, as at the tone in which Fergus spoke these two words. ‘Well, I wish you luck, old boy. I suppose they are getting on famously out there. Are you going to settle?’

‘Yes; I’m going to buy land with the money my uncle left me, and start farming.’

‘All serene; I’ll come out and see you when I’m through with *my* grinding,’ said Alastair, with the air of a hard-worked student. ‘Come on out for a stroll, Fergus. It’s a lovely night. You never saw a more glorious moon, and we can talk as well outside as here.’

‘I don’t mind if I do,’ said Fergus, reaching out for his boots.

He felt glad, honestly glad, to see Alastair. He liked him better than any fellow he knew. But who did not like Alastair?

He had taken his dismissal from Sheila very philosophically, though it had been a grievous disappointment at the time. But Alastair believed in making the best of everything, and so kept himself and others happy.

They strolled out together arm in arm, and turned along Nicolson Street towards Newington. Fergus did the most of the talking, and did not pay much attention to anything passing round him, but Alastair’s eyes and ears were always open.

‘I say, Fergus, that’s uncommon like M’Bean. It is him,’ he said suddenly. ‘And who’s that he’s got with him? What a pretty girl!’

Fergus looked up, and his eyes fell on the sweet face of Katie Menzies. She was walking on the other side of the street, and her hand was through Angus M’Bean’s arm, and

her face lifted confidently to his. The sight made the hot, indignant blood surge to Fergus Macleod's face, and tingle even to his very finger tips.

'I know who it is. A girl from the Fauld. She's here for no good. But I'll be even with him. I'll make him give an account of himself, and I'll take her home, if she'll go.'

'You won't go one step just now,' said Alastair, gripping him firm and fast by the arm. 'You never want to miss a chance of distinguishing yourself, if it's only in a street brawl. Do you want to be the centre of a crowd immediately, and have a bobby marching you off to the lock-up? You've no business to interfere with M'Bean, or the lassie either.'

'Yes, I have,' said Fergus fiercely. 'She's one of my folk, and she's an orphan, and he had no right, the villain! to entice her away. I *will* go, Alastair. Let go my arm.'

'Wait a minute. Now she's gone into a shop. Let's go over and pretend to meet M'Bean accidentally, and see how he'll look. Will you promise first not to take him by the throat, for you look fit enough, or even to speak, till I give you leave? We'll manage it all beautifully, and circumvent him too, if you only keep down your wild Macdonald temper. It'll be the undoing of you some day, Fergus, my boy.'

Fergus held his peace, though his eyes were suspiciously brilliant-looking. So, keeping him tightly by the arm, Alastair marched him across the street. Katie was in a provision store, and Angus was standing at the window surveying the tempting array of ham, butter, eggs, and cheese displayed there. He did not see the two young men pass him, nor hear Alastair's smothered laughter. It was so irresistibly funny to him to see the dandified Angus M'Bean standing apparently engrossed at a grocer's window. After going a few yards they turned again, and stopped beside the window too; then Angus saw them, but didn't seem greatly put out, or even apprehensive of discovery.

'Are you making a study of the prices, in order to come down with a fell swoop on an unprincipled landlady?' asked Alastair, for the sake of keeping Fergus quiet. He was himself rather mystified by M'Bean's perfect self-possession, for at any moment

Katie might come out of the shop. She did come presently, with her hands laden with sundry small packages, of which Angus immediately relieved her. There was a pleasant, proud smile on his face, which gave Katie confidence, though at sight of the two gentlemen she had grown very red.

'Katie, I need not introduce you to Mr. Fergus Macleod,' said Angus, rather enjoying the thing. 'This is Mr. Alastair Murray of Murrayshaugh — my wife.'

The two last words were uttered in a tone which put an end to all suspicion. Fergus was covered with confusion. Alastair was hard put to it to restrain his mirth at the sudden quenching of Fergus's indignation. But he did manage to utter a few words of congratulation, and to say that he would be very happy to call upon Mrs. M'Bean at No. 28 Rankeillor Street.

As for Fergus, he tried to mutter something, but was glad when Alastair hurried him away. That incident put an end to their confidential talk for the night. Fergus could think and speak of nothing but the marriage of Puddin' and Katie. When had it taken place, and where? why had he never heard of it? and a thousand other questions as unanswerable; until Alastair, tired of the theme, told him he was a perfect nuisance, and took the 'bus away home.

When Fergus went back to his lodgings, he found a letter from his mother, in which she mentioned that great consternation was in Achnaufauld over Katie Menzies' disappearance, and that consternation had given place that day to the utmost surprise, because her marriage with young Angus M'Bean was announced in the *Courant* of Tuesday. She added that they were saying Malcolm's usage had compelled Katie to run away from him, and that they were saying, too, that Malcolm had gone clean out of his mind over it. Fergus was so excited over all this news, that, though it was nearly nine o'clock, he put on his cap and ran away round to No. 28 Rankeillor Street. It was M'Bean's old lodgings; for, as he was in negotiations for a situation as under-factor in Roxburghshire, it would not have been wise to take a house in Edinburgh. Fergus asked for Mrs. M'Bean, and was instantly shown into the sitting-room,

where the young couple were having a cup of coffee and a bit of bread and cheese for supper.

Katie, all blushes and smiles, jumped up at sight of Mr. Fergus, who held out his hand, and said heartily,—

‘I just came round to congratulate you, Mrs. McBean. I was stunned in the street, and hadn’t a word to say. I beg your pardon, Angus, and I wish you joy.’

‘Not at all; delighted to see you, aren’t we, Katie?’ said Angus, a trifle confusedly. ‘Will you take a cup of coffee? Ring for a cup and plate, Katie. Sit down, Fergus.’

So Fergus sat down at the table with them, and how proud and happy was the bonnie young wife to have Mr. Fergus sitting at her own table. Never had she looked so sweet, so graceful, so happy. Happiness is a great beautifier, and there was no need to ask if Katie was happy. Fergus felt more and more ashamed of himself for his uncharitable suspicions about her husband.

‘I’m only vexed at running away as I did from Malcolm,’ said Katie, with a tremble of the lip, after they had spoken for a little about it. ‘But if he had known, I believe he would have killed me, Mr. Fergus. I dinna ken what’s to become of poor Malky. I fear he’ll need to go to Murthly at the end. He’s no’ safe.’

‘You can’t vex yourself about him, Katie, for I’m sure you did more than your duty to him,’ said Fergus kindly. ‘And are you going back to spend Easter at Auchloy?’

‘O no; we’re disinherited,’ said Angus, with a laugh, ‘by everybody but my mother. She sent Katie her blessing and a silk dress. We’re done with Auchloy.’

He spoke lightly; and, indeed, he did not feel the rupture with the others as long as he had his mother’s blessing. But Fergus saw Katie’s sweet face shadow a little. Now that she was his wife beyond recall, she feared he had sacrificed too much for her. But he would not let her think it, much less say it. A new man, indeed, in every respect was Puddin’ McBean.

They confided their hopes and plans to Fergus, and it was near midnight when he went back to his lodgings. They

seemed dreary and cold. The sight of Angus and his bonnie wife had reminded him of what was so far out of his reach. Even if Sheila cared for him, and remained true, many years must pass before he could hope even to stand as an equal in her presence.



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CHAPTER XXXVII

A DARK NIGHT.

I suffered hate, slow hate,
That bides its time.

J. B. SELKIRK.

FERGUS MACLEOD went home as usual upon the thirty-first of March. Their steamer, the *Bosphorus*, was to sail from Glasgow on the twenty-second of April. He found that his mother had got the preparations well forward for their departure, and that she was in the best of health and spirits. The intervening time passed rapidly, for there was a great deal still to do; and their last day at Shonnen, in the old Glen, came before they knew where they were. The best of the things at Shonnen were going with them; for though the transit of their goods would be more expensive than their own passages, money would be saved at the other end. There were no upholsterers' warehouses as yet in the township at Fergus Creek.

'I'm going over to the Fauld, mother, to say good-bye, and get all their last messages for the folks over the sea,' said Fergus, after their early tea. 'But I shall not be late.'

'Don't hurry; I am going out also, Fergus, up to Dalmore.'

Fergus gave a quick start, and looked at his mother with something of apprehension in his eye. She smiled a little, and shook her head.

'I have something to say to Sheila, Fergus,—something which it would not grieve you very much to hear. Can I take her any message from you?'

'None, except that I have not forgotten the last night of the year and my vow,' said Fergus, a little huskily; and, going up to his mother, he kissed her, without saying another word.

They understood each other; but if Fergus, as he strolled along to the Fauld, thought more of the house on the hill than the low-lying clachan whither he was bound, it need not be wondered at. He went by Kinloch, looked in for a word with the few who still remained there, and then crossed the bridge, and up by Malcolm Menzies' croft to Janet's cottage. He had never yet seen Malcolm since he came home. He had had a great deal of journeying to and from Glasgow, as well as to Crieff and Dunkeld, in connection with their voyage; but though he had been several times in the Fauld, as I said, he had never seen Malcolm. He had heard of him, however,—dark hints from most of the folk, and even Rob Macnaughton could only shake his head when his name was mentioned. Rob had sustained a severe disappointment in the ill turning out of Malcolm, who, beyond a doubt, had the heaven-born gift of song, though he had never given it voice. It was not his blame, poor lad! if nature had given him the larger gift, she had taken from him something of infinitely greater value. There was no doubt that Malcolm Menzies lacked in judgment, and that the folk were not far wrong when they called him 'daft.' No human being had heard him speak Katie's name since she went away; and one man who mentioned it one day suddenly found himself levelled to the ground. The melancholy, miserable man dwelt alone in the cottage which Katie's bonnie presence had been wont to brighten, and no foot but his own was ever allowed to step across it. How he lived they did not know. For days together there would be no smoke at his 'lum-heid,' and he had sold all his cows. A crust of bread and a drink of water was his only food, and in a few weeks' time he was reduced to a skeleton. Rob Macnaughton had tried to take him in hand,—had pointed out that Katie had made a good marriage, for which he, Malcolm, should be thankful; but the wild,

disordered brain seemed incapable of taking in the fact. He had but one desire,—though, with the cunning of the insane, it was never breathed, —and that was to have his revenge upon Angus M'Bean. He was biding his time; and, having heard that young Angus had come over for a day or two alone, to get away some of his belongings from Auchloy, he was constantly prowling about on the watch. Fergus found the cottage door locked; and though he peered in at both windows, there was no sign of Malcolm. He was, indeed, prowling about the birch wood on the other side of the loch, waiting for young Angus M'Bean, whom he had seen cross the bridge in the afternoon. Disappointed of Malcolm, Fergus leaped the burn, and lifted the sneek of Rob Macnaughton's door. Rob was at his loom, which went somewhat slowly and heavily now, for the stocking-weaver's powerful limbs were not proof against the hand of time. Rob had now become a bent old man.

'Rob, come into the kitchen!' cried Fergus cheerily. 'Mind, it's our last crack.'

Rob got off his stool as nimbly as his rheumatic leg would allow him, and came hripling ben to the kitchen, with the old-time smile on his face.

'So, lad, ye are for off?'

'Ay, Rob; to-morrow Glenquach will know me no more,—at least for some years,' he added, and his voice gave a quiver. It *was* a wrench to leave the old Glen, and Achnafauld,—ay, and Crom Creagh, which sheltered what was dearer to him than life itself.

'Weel, weel, when ye come back, Fergus Macleod, the grass will be green abune Rob Macnaughton in Shian, and the merle maybe singing on his grave. Ye are a braw chield! The Lord bless ye, an' bring ye back to them that lo'e ye, and they are mony, both here an' ower the sea.'

'More than I deserve, Rob,' Fergus said soberly. 'I thought maybe you'd have a new song for me to take over to Fergus Creek. I doubt you are getting lazy in your old age.'

'My singing days are done, lad. An' what's to become o' our young lady after ye are away? Ye are but a fule, though

I say it, Mr. Fergus, to leave sic a prize to be snappit up by anybody.'

'I am not worthy, Rob,' Fergus answered, in a low voice.

'And what for no'? Ye wadna like onybody but yoursel' to say that, nor wad I,' said the stocking-weaver, who had utterly refused to credit any of the detrimental stories he had heard about his favourite, and thought he had no equal in the wide world. 'Man, I think I'd rather be a laird in Glenquaich than in America, though it seems a guid land, if Donald Macalpine and Jamie Stewart write what's true. Miss Sheila would fain have had them back after the thing was in her hands, but they seemed to think themsel's better whaur they are.'

'Rob, do you know whether she wrote to any of them?'

'Ay did she, for she showed me the letter; and old though I be, my een were wet as I read it. She wrote to Jamie Stewart, offering him Turrich for half naething, an' Little Turrich for young Rob, and the smiddy to Donald Macalpine; but they never sent back a single word, which made me mad, I can tell ye, for the credit o' the Glen.'

'It was certainly very ungrateful. I shall ask them what they meant, and make them send back a humble apology by the next mail. Rob, I'll miss having your door to run to when the spirit moves me.'

'Ay, lad; and your blithesome face will come no more in at my door. Ye hae been sunlicht an' munelicht an' a' to me, Fergus,—you an' Miss Sheila.'

'She will always come,' said Fergus quickly. 'And I can think I see her sitting here, and you reading out of your old poetry books.'

'Mr. Fergus,' said Rob, with a low, delightful laugh, 'she was for me printin' my sangs in the Gaelic, and giein' them to the world, as she put it. But I shakes my heid, and I says, "When I'm awa', they'll be yours, my doo, to dae what ye like wi'." So maybe, wha kens? Rob Macnaughton's name 'll live after him, jist like Shakespeare and Sir Walter,—ay, ay, jist like Shakespeare and Sir Walter.'

Fergus could not but smile at the old man's delight. The idea that Sheila had thought them worthy to be put in print

had pleased him, though he would not consent to its being done in his lifetime.

'Fergus, ye didna see Malcolm Menzies as ye cam' by?' asked the old man, changing the subject, and speaking in a very anxious tone.

'I wanted to, Rob, but his door was locked.'

Rob shook his head.

'I kenna what the end will be. It'll be his ain life, or some other body's. Eh, Fergus, what for did the Almichty gie the puir lad one gift, an' tak' awa' his judgment?'

'Do you really think Malcolm is mad, Rob?'

'He's no' faur off it. He should be shut up, Fergus; but they'll no' dae it or there's mischief dune. I saw him awa' ower the brig at six o'clock, with a shearin'-heuk in his hand, an' afore that I saw the factor awa' to Kinloch, or maybe farther. Young Angus is here, too. They should tell him to keep a safe distance frae the Fauld. How like his faither he has got! Ye could hardly tell the ane frae the ither, unless ye saw them face to face.'

'Angus M'Bean has turned out well,' said Fergus. 'I am sorry about poor Malcolm. He used to be a fine lad, and I thought he would make something better.'

Rob shook his head.

'Do you really think he would do any harm to anybody, Rob?'

'Ay do I. I wadna trust him; an' I hoped when I saw him awa' ower the brig wi' the heuk that the factor would gang round by Garrows, an' no' come through the plantin' after dark.'

'But it's young Angus he has the grudge at, Rob.'

'Ay; but when a man's bluid's up he doesna care wha comes first. I thocht when I saw him gang that he had mista'en the faither for the son; but maybe I'm ill-judgin' the laddie.'

'I'm going over to Auchloy to see Angus. If his father isn't home, I'll send him out after him,' said Fergus, rising. A vague sense of uneasiness was upon him. What did Malcolm mean by going over the brig, with a shearing-hook in his hand, at that time of night?

'Dae that, lad. There's a sense of evil in the air that I

canna understand. I could hope, laddie, that yer last nicht in the Glen be na shadowed wi' a crime. My mind is not at rest; but if the factor were at Shian, I think, surely, he wad gang round by Garrows.'

Rob had imparted to Fergus his own apprehension, and the young man walked as fast as he could up to Auchloy. The night was closing in, and a cloud, dark, heavy, and ominous, came stealing up the Glen, and turned the shining loch into a black and frowning sea. A sudden wind rose, and swept up the Glen with a gusty shriek. Fergus looked across at the birch plantation beyond the loch with a curious sick feeling at his heart. Was there a dark tragedy even now being enacted there, and was nature giving warning of it? He gave a loud knock at the door of Auchloy. To his relief, Angus himself opened it.

'Get your hat, Angus, and come out,' he said quickly. 'I want to speak to you. Don't disturb the ladies.'

Angus McBean looked amazed, the manner of Fergus was so uneasy and strange. He snatched a cap from the hall table, and came out quickly, closing the door behind him.

'Is your father in, Angus?' Fergus asked.

'No, he has gone to Shian. We're expecting him, though, shortly.'

'Will he come home by Garrows?'

'No; by Turrich and Kinloch. He wants to see Peter Ross at Turrich, and he would not be in from the fields until after seven, at any rate.'

'We'll go and meet him, then, Angus. I don't want to alarm you,' said Fergus, 'but I fear Malcolm Menzies means mischief to-night. Have you seen him since you came home?'

'No. What do you mean, Fergus?' asked Angus quickly, with a disturbed, startled look on his face.

'Rob Macnaughton saw him away over the bridge, and didn't like the look of him,' said Fergus. 'He may mean nothing, but it can do us no harm to go as far as the plantation and meet your father.'

Fergus was much excited. Angus, though the interest was more specially his, was quite cool. But he was cast in a

different mould from Fergus Macleod. Besides, he did not really apprehend any danger from Mr. John Menzies. If his father should meet him, he thought they would be equally matched.

So, as they walked from Auchloy to the Fauld, and across the croft to the bridge, he talked all the way about other things, chiefly about the voyage Fergus was about to make. It was quite dark by the time they reached the bridge; there was no moon, and the clouds were heavy. It was impossible to see more than a step or two in front. Beyond the bridge the lights of Kinloch gleamed cheerily through the gloom, and somewhat relieved the inky blackness. As they passed over the bridge they heard the sullen flow of the river, which was very deep just where it rose out of the loch. Their talk flagged a little after they had passed by Kinloch and neared the birch wood. They entered its black shadow, and walked a few hundred yards; then Angus stopped.

'Let's listen,' he said, in a whisper.

They stood absolutely still, almost breathless, but not a sound broke the still and heavy air.

'I don't think there's any use going further,' said Angus then. 'My father might go round by Garrows. It's not a nice road this after dark, and he would take the chance of a drive if he got it. The horse was tired with thirty miles this morning, that's why he walked.'

'Well, if you are satisfied, we can go back,' said Fergus. 'We might wait here long enough. As like as not, Malcolm Menzies will be locked in his own house by this time. I wonder, though, they don't move to have him taken away. It really isn't safe for him to be going about.'

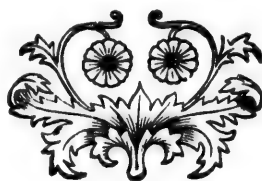
'I don't think he'd do much harm myself,' said Angus lightly. 'Are you going straight along to Shonnen?'

'Yes; I'm too late as it is,' said Fergus; and they walked very sharply back to Kinloch.

'Good-bye, then,' said Fergus, stretching out his hand. 'I won't likely see you again. Give my love to Mrs. M'Beam. You needn't be jealous, when I'm going away so soon and so far.'

'Not a bit, thank you, Fergus. Good-bye,' said Angus, and

went whistling over the bridge, and away back to Auchloy, thinking all the way of his bonnie wife, whom he would see again by that hour on the morrow. When he arrived, he found that his father had not come home. The hours passed,—ay, and the night,—but Angus M'Bean the elder returned no more to his home.



k to Auchloy,
he would see
e arrived, he
ours passed,—
r returned no



CHAPTER XXXVIII

PEACE.

Love found me in the wilderness,
Where I myself had lost.

TRENCH.



HE sun had not set when Ellen Macleod crossed over the Girron Brig that evening for the first time since the day of Macdonald's burying. She could not but think of that day and of its bitterness. She wished she could forget, but memory is relentless when her record has a sting of remorse. It was a fine mild evening, the air motionless and heavy, and the sun sank under a great mass of dark purple cloud, made somewhat weird by the sharp edge of blood-red against it. There was rain in that purple cloud.

The burn was big with the spring-tide showers, and danced and leaped merrily under the old bridge, on which all the mosses were green, and little clumps of delicate oak fern, springing here and there in odd corners, contrasted finely with the yellow of the primroses and the stonecup. There was a dreamy, far-off look upon the serene face of Ellen Macleod as she trod that familiar way, and before she went within the shadow of the trees on the carriage-way, she turned and looked back upon Amulree and Shonnen, and then away up the Glen to the trees at Shinn. Her lips moved, and her eyes shone. She was

bidding farewell to it all, her last farewell. As she looked, her lips moved silently, perhaps in prayer. The hall door stood wide open at Dalmore, and just within it the staghound was lying, as if keeping guard over it. He raised his majestic head and gave a growl at sight of the stranger, and then, as if moved by a second thought, he came slowly to meet her, giving his tail a friendly wag to reassure her. She laid her hand on his head, and spoke a word to him, which appeared to please him hugely, for he gambolled before her in his uncouth fashion up to the door. The dog's welcome pleased her. It seemed to augur well for her reception within. The housemaid who answered the bell looked very genuinely surprised to see her.

'Step into the library, ma'am, if you please, and I'll tell Miss Sheila,' she said, holding open the library door. An ordinary caller would have been ushered at once to the drawing-room, but the girl was dubious whether her young mistress would see Mrs. Macleod. She saw her look of surprise when the girl gave her the name, but without a moment's hesitation she went downstairs. She stood just a second at the library door, for her heart was beating more quickly than usual. She did not know what this visit of Ellen Macleod might portend. When she entered the room her colour was heightened, and when Ellen Macleod turned from the window and saw the lissom figure in soft grey, the sweet face crowned by its plaits of sunny hair, and wearing a half-startled look, she thought she had never beheld a more lovely creature.

'Good-evening,' Sheila said kindly, but did not offer her hand. She did not quite know how to act. The memory of the past was with her, but there was that in the face of Ellen Macleod she had never seen upon it before, and which seemed to make the childish terror more and more like a dream.

Ellen Macleod looked for a moment on the girl's sweet, flushed face, then she advanced swiftly, with outstretched hands.

'Will you touch my hand in friendship, Sheila Macdonald, just to give me courage to go on?'

'I do not understand you,' Sheila faltered; and she laid her own soft, warm young hands on those outstretched to her.

Then Ellen Macleod bent and kissed them, before she drew herself away.

'I have come, though late,' she said, with a curious huskiness in her voice, 'to ask your forgiveness for all the wrong I have done to you.'

'It is nothing!' cried Sheila, out of her sweet compassion 'nothing at all. I am so glad to see you. Do sit down: do come up and take off your bonnet, and stay with me for a little. I am so glad to see you at Dalmore.'

'Oh, child! you make me ashamed,' cried Ellen Macleod, and her proud mouth trembled. 'Can you forgive me, not only for yourself, but for those who are away?'

'Yes, yes; don't say another word!' cried Sheila, with wet eyes, and a smile which radiated her whole face. 'Look at my mother there in the picture. She seems to smile upon us. I am sure she is glad to see us together.'

Ellen Macleod broke down. She threw herself in a chair, and sobbed convulsively; and Sheila, moving to her side, laid her hand gently on her shoulder, but said never a word.

'I have been a wicked woman, Sheila,' she said at length. 'God sent me a terrible lesson that night Fergus came here. I thought I had sent him to his death. It was a terrible lesson, but not more terrible than I needed. My heart was like the nether millstone, Sheila, but that awful night broke it. I could not live through such another.'

Sheila touched the white hair with a very tender, lingering touch. There was something almost divine in the look upon her face. She had a heart an angel might have envied. She only wished she could wipe away every sting which memory had planted in the bosom of the woman by her side. The past was forgotten. Its harshest discords were lost in the sweet harmony of this blessed moment. Her heart's desire was fulfilled. The only enemy she had had in the world was now her friend. A sense of the goodness and mercy of God filled the child's soul with a song of humble thanksgiving. She could have knelt upon her knees and prayed.

'I have long wished to come, but my courage failed me. When I thought of what I had done to you, of the wicked

thoughts I had entertained towards you, my conscience seemed to dare me to come. But we go away to-morrow, and I told myself that I could not go without a word of forgiveness and farewell.'

'Oh, I wish you were not going now!' cried Sheila impulsively. 'How different it would be! Could you not stay even yet?'

Ellen Macleod shook her head, with a somewhat sad smile.

'No; our course is shaped, and we must fulfil our destiny. And it will be for my son's good. He will have out there the life he loves, and has always craved for. Sheila Macdonald, if you live to have sons of your own, you will understand what I feel now, though you will never be able to understand the part I acted towards my boy in his youth. I was not fit to be a mother, nor to have the care and upbringing of a child. When I look upon my son I am amazed that he should be such as he is. God has not punished me as I deserved, though that night I feared He had.'

Sheila was silent, with her tender touch still upon the shoulder of Fergus's mother. She could not join in his praise; but ah! what was in her heart?

'I can go away now content, Sheila Macdonald,' said Ellen Macleod, rising at length, and laying her hands somewhat heavily on the girl's slender shoulders. 'And I go, praying God bless Dalmore, and its bonnie, sweet mistress, for ever and ever! It is worthy of her, and she of it.'

Sheila bowed her head under that blessing, the sweetest she had ever heard.

'Would you not go through the house before you go?' she said timidly. 'You might like a last look, though I will not believe you will never come back; and if there is anything you would care to take to keep you in remembrance of Dalmore, do not hesitate, I entreat you. It will please me more than I can say if you will but take whatever you would like.'

'I need nothing to remind me of Dalmore,' said Ellen Macleod, with a touch of passionate sadness in her voice. 'Child, child, I know every stone and tree about it. I can

shut my eyes and see every room in its minutest detail. Tell me, did the white heather your mother planted live?'

'O yes; the pots are in the greenhouse. I was telling Lachlan that I thought the weather mild enough now for them to be brought round to the door. They are covered with buds already.'

'Then all I want is a spray with a little root at it to plant in a pot beside a bit of purple heather from Shonnen; and if they grow together, Sheila, it will be an emblem of my hope.'

But what that hope was Sheila did not ask. It might be that she understood. When she went away, Sheila accompanied her down to the Girron Brig, and in the solemn, dusky twilight they parted there.

'I have my son's message yet,' said Ellen Macleod. 'He bade me tell you that he had not forgotten the last night of the year, nor the vow he made to you then. What that vow was I know not, but I pray God reward you for the good words you spoke to Fergus Macleod that night. They were his salvation, and whatever his future may be, if he achieve aught that is noble or worthy, he will owe it, under God, to you, and not to me, his mother, who would give her right hand for the privilege. I can only wait upon and serve for love; it is *you* who will make the *man*. Have you any message for the boy? His heart will hunger for a word to carry with him across the sea.'

'Tell him,' said Sheila, struggling with her tears, 'that I have forgotten that night, and that I look forward to the day when he will come back. Tell him that, be that day soon or late, he will find a welcome at Dalmore.'

'I will. Sheila, will you kiss me before I go? We shall never meet again.'

So they kissed each other solemnly, silently, and went their separate ways. Sheila's heart beat with a hungry, passionate pain as she went back to her lonely home. Looking from out the drawing-room window across to the bright light in the dining-room at Shonnen, she thought she would give much—ay, even Dalmore itself—to go with these exiles across the sea. All day she had been upheld by the hope that Fergus himself would come for a word of farewell, and to see if she had any

message for those across the sea. But he had kept his vow to see her face no more until he should have redeemed the time, and had a white fair page to lay above that blemished one which would be ever before his eyes as a warning and a shield in the time of temptation or moral trial, and though Sheila understood it all quite well, and honoured him for his steadfastness of purpose, her woman's heart was rebelliously sore, and even the future seemed dark and gloomy. It was shrouded in uncertainty, and she could not find much comfort even in the thought that Fergus had promised to come back.

Ellen Macleod was home before Fergus. She found Jessie Mackenzie busy among the baggage, bustling about with a great sense of importance. She had elected to throw in her fortunes with the small family she had so long served, and they were only too willing to take her with them.

'I'm sure Maister Fergus needna hae bidden sae lang at the Fauld the nicht,' were the words with which she greeted her mistress. 'There's five boxes no' roped, an' it's nine o'clock, an' the cart comin' at six o'clock in the morning.'

'Mr. Fergus will not be long of roping these, Jessie,' said her mistress good-humouredly. 'Now, while you were packing, did you keep to the lists I made out, so that we can lay our hands on what we want without requiring to turn every box out?'

'Yes, ma'am, everything's richt; jist ask me when ye want onything, an' I'll lay my finger on it jist at once,' replied Jessie proudly; and just then Mr. Fergus returned, and her mind was relieved by the sight of the five boxes roped and labelled, ready for the hold of the *Bosphorus*.

Over the fire that night Fergus and his mother talked of past, present, and future, and when she gave him Sheila's message he never said a word. She forbore to look at him while she delivered it, and immediately changed the subject, for which her son blessed her in his heart. At six o'clock next morning a carriage from Dalmore came bowling over the Girron Brig, and drew up at the gate of Shonnen. The coachman had a note for Mrs. Macleod. It was only to beg that, as a last favour, she would make use of the carriage to the station, and there was a basket of spring flowers and some hot-house fruit for the journey.

'Hae ye heard the news about Auchloy, sir?' asked the man, touching his hat to Fergus when he came out of the gate.

'No; what's that?' asked Fergus, in a startled voice.

'He wasna hame a' nicht, and they've found him this morning in the Braan just below the brig, dead.'

'Drowned?' asked Fergus, in horror.

'Ay; but he was hurt, they say, afore he was thrown over. They're seekin' for Malcolm Menzies. He hasna been in the Fauld since the forenicht yesterday. They say he's awa' ower the hills to Aberfeldy, clean stark mad.'

Ah, poor Malcolm Menzies! The bitter end had come. The nursing of a revengeful passion, working upon an excitable, overstrung temperament, had thrown reason from her throne. Fergus, remembering their laddie-time, turned away with his eyes full of tears.






CHAPTER XXXIX.

MACDONALD'S LAST WILL.

Does the road wind up hill all the way?—
Yes, to the very end.



HEY found poor Malcolm ere the day was far spent, and took him to Perth Prison to await his trial. The trial would be a mere form, for nothing could be proved; and it was probable that, after the examination, he would be removed to the asylum at Murthly. Colin Fisher, the farmer in Kinloch, had been the first to see the body of the factor lying on the river bank in the early morning. He was quite dead, with a long bruise on the temple, administered by some heavy instrument, or perhaps sustained in his fall. The affair was discussed in all its bearings with that morbid minuteness country people love. The wildest rumours were afloat; but as there were no eye-witnesses to the struggle,—if there had been a struggle,—nothing certain could be known. The acceptable idea, however, was that Malcolm, in the frenzy of the moment, had thrown Angus M'Bean over the bridge. It was impossible, owing to the height of the parapet, that he could have fallen over it, even if struggling close by it. It created a painful sensation in the Glen, where both were well known. There was nothing but pity for the poor lad who had done the cruel deed; and as for Angus M'Bean, the factor, they spoke



kindly of him, with that beautiful touch of loving-kindness and charity which death never fails to bring forth. He is a callous man who will speak evil of the dead. Angus M'Bean the younger went through to Edinburgh, and brought his wife to Auchloy the following morning. His mother, with an unselfish kindness for which many blessed her, and none more earnestly than poor Katie herself, would not turn her back upon the innocent because of another's sin. She it was who wrote the sad news to Katie, and she gave her a daughter's welcome to Auchloy. And in a few days all was over, and Angus M'Bean was laid to rest in the kirkyard at Amulree, and his faults were buried with him.

During that trying time for the Auchloy household, Sheila was constant in her kind attention to them. It was in such ways, sharing their griefs, and sympathizing with their joys, that the young Lady of Dalmore endeared herself to her people. She believed that a great responsibility rested upon her; she held her heritage as a solemn trust, and, as far as her knowledge went, did her utmost for all with whom she had to deal. There were few grumbings now in Glenquaich, for Sheila was a wise, just, generous mistress. She did not, however, give charity to any except the most needy; she had a shrewd sense of what was due to herself, likewise; and it was her aim and desire to foster in the cottars that independent, self-reliant spirit which was wont to be Scotland's glory. Of indiscriminate giving she had seen the evil, and, while carrying out all reasonable improvements, and giving her tenants fair conditions under which to live, she required that there should be no arrears of rent after some past debts to the estate were wiped away. There was no excuse for the idle or the shiftless, and these, of course, complained that the new rule was as hard as the old. Sheila knew every household in the Glen, and kept the black sheep, of whom there were a few, strictly under her own surveillance. She had her troubles; sometimes her generous kindness and honest endeavours were met by ingratitude and disappointment; but, on the whole, the Glen, and especially the Fauld, was in a flourishing, contented state. Shortly after the factor's death, and having first taken counsel with her friend and adviser, Mr.

Colquhoun, the lawyer, Sheila rode over to Auchloy one night, towards the end of May, to interview young Angus McBean. She was taken into the drawing-room, where Katie, looking very white and tired, had lain down on the couch for a rest. Malcolm was constantly in Katie's heart. Sheila was shocked to see her. Could that pale, shadowy creature in the black frock be the bonnie red-cheeked Katie of yore? She started up, ashamed of being caught; but Sheila's kind smile, ever ready, reassured her.

'The heat has tired you, Katie; isn't it *very* hot for May?' she said pleasantly. 'I hope your husband is in; I want very much to see him.'

'He will not be very far *away*, Miss Sheila,' said Katie, and seated herself dispiritedly on the sofa, as if she had lost her interest in life.

'Katie, you look quite ill; I am afraid you *are* vexing yourself about something.'

'It's Malky, Miss Sheila; *ye* see, I daurna mention his name here; but oh, if I could only *see* him! Do you—do you think he'll be hanged?'

The words came out in a sort of gasp; and the look of absolute terror and agony on Katie's face shocked Sheila inexpressibly. The thought of Malcolm on the scaffold had dwelt with Katie night and day, and was eating her very heart out. Sheila was filled with compassion, understanding how the poor girl's feelings were pent up in her own breast. She must have suffered terribly during the last few weeks.

'Hanged! O no, Katie dear; you must not think of such a thing,' she said, with quiet reassurance. 'I was at Crieff to-day seeing Mr. Colquhoun, and we were speaking about Malcolm. He says—and you know he is a very clever man, Katie—that Malcolm will not be punished at all, even if *anything* were proved, and that is impossible; he was not responsible. He will be sent to Murthly, and will be very kindly and carefully dealt with there, I assure you. You may believe what I am saying, Katie, for I would not deceive you, and Mr. Colquhoun knows all about it.'

Katie burst into tears. What relief these words gave her

none knew but herself. She dried her eyes hastily when the door opened and her husband entered. She left the room immediately; and Sheila saw how Angus's eyes followed her, and knew that it had made no difference to him.

'Your wife has been vexing herself needlessly about her brother,' said Sheila, after she had shaken hands with Angus. 'I quite understand how she cannot talk about it, even to *you*.'

'I saw there was something worrying her. I know what it is. But they can't do anything to him, nor would we wish it,' said Angus, in a low voice. 'Poor Malcolm was not responsible.'

'I have just been telling Katie that, but if you would tell her too, I am sure it would do good,' said Sheila. 'I came over to see you on a little matter of business. Are you going back to Edinburgh soon?'

'Indeed, I don't know, Miss Sheila; I must stay here, I suppose, till I get something to do,' said Angus, with rather a melancholy smile, for he had found office-seeking a heartless task.

'Would you care to take your father's place?' Sheila asked at once.

Angus McBean flushed all over with surprise and delight. The idea had not occurred to him, as he did not consider himself qualified for such a post.

'I am not fit, Miss Sheila. I have had no experience—practical experience, I mean; but I *would* do my utmost to serve you,' he said, not without emotion.

'I am sure of that; and, you know, as to experience, we will be the less likely to fall out, for I have a great many whims. Do you think you could put up with them?'

Angus McBean did not for the moment speak. A load was lifted from his heart. He saw that it was not a wise nor a good thing for him and his young wife to dwell under the same roof with his mother and sisters, however kind they might be. He knew that it must soon have an end. He had almost begun to fear, indeed, that, dearly as he loved Katie, he had done her an injury in marrying her before he had a home to offer her.

'You mustn't say a word,' said Sheila, with a pretty, wilful

smile, 'for I have quite made up my mind about it, and laid all my plans. Your mother and sisters will stay on here,—that is, if they wish it, and you and Katie can live at Shonnen. Mrs. Macleod left the keys with me, and I know she will be quite pleased that you should live in it.'

'Katie will thank you, Miss Sheila, for I cannot,' said Angus M'Bean huskily; 'but I will do my utmost to serve you.'

'I am sure of it, and I need no thanks,' said Sheila, with a sunny smile. 'I have spoken to Mr. Colquhoun about it. I went to see him to-day for that purpose. You will go down to Crieff at an early day, Mr. M'Bean, will you not, and settle the whole matter with him? And now I must shake hands with my new factor, and run away, for the boy will be tired of holding Rob Roy, who has a rooted aversion to a strange hand on his bridle.'

She would not wait for thanks. Sheila did not do good for self-h motives, to win approbation and flattery and praise. She was, as I said, honestly striving to fill worthily and well the responsible place God had apportioned to her. She did the duty lying to her hand, and so found a blessing with it. She went away from Auchloy that night leaving sunshine behind. She had given to the young couple, who had nothing in this world but loving hearts and willing hands, an aim and a hope for the future. The very day after his son's hasty marriage, Angus M'Bean the elder had drawn up a new will, leaving everything to his wife and daughters. Young Angus had not even the proverbial shilling to console him, and matters had begun to look serious for him and his young wife. But Angus would not long have remained idle. Love had made a man of him, and he would not be ashamed to soil his hands for Katie.

Sheila gave Rob Roy the rein going home, and that frisky animal almost flew over the road. She wanted some violent, invigorating influence; the days had been strangely dark and even purposeless since Fergus went away. She had thought that there would not be much difference. She had seen him so seldom, even while he was in Edinburgh; but ah! the rolling sea was a strange barrier, and the world beyond Glenquach was very wide. She had quite decided, indeed, after the business

about the new factor was concluded, to go over to Murrayshaugh for a week. She was wearying to see Aunt Ailsa, and Alastair also, because he would talk to her about Fergus.

Ah! in some things, after all, Sheila was a little selfish. She did not take into account that Alastair's honest heart might have received a serious wound. But he had certainly done his best to show her that he did not mind his dismissal in the least.

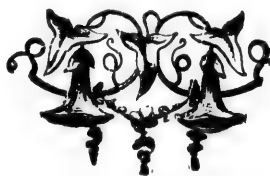
After dinner that evening, Sheila went into the library to write two letters,—a brief note to her aunt, fixing a day for Murrayshaugh, and a letter to Mrs. Macleod, acquainting her with her rapid disposal of the house at Shonnen. There was a deep drawer in the *escritoire*, in which still lay all the books which had been Macdonald's companions in his last illness. Sheila had wished them to be placed there untouched. She opened the drawer to use the blotting-book, her own being up in her dressing-room, and, almost involuntarily, she began to spell out once more the disjointed words which had been impressed on it the last time it was used. Then the old shadow crept up, chilly and darkly, over her heart,—the bygone fear lest she should be enjoying the heritage of another, lest Fergus Macleod should have gone forth to a life of toil and hardship when he should be by right Laird of Dalmore. After poring over the book for a long time, she began to lift the other things out one by one. At the bottom lay the Bible which Macdonald had been reading the day he died. It was an old-fashioned volume, with curious leather covers, which had a lining of green silk, and a little pocket into which the boards of the book were slipped. Sheila looked at the old volume with interest, and, when she opened it, a faint perfume of dried rosemary and thyme greeted her, and it seemed to have a message from the past. Just as she was about to close it, the leaves slipped over to the last page, and she then noticed a folded paper within the green silk pocket made by the lining. Without a thought—certainly, without the least suspicion of its contents—she slipped it out, and unfolded it on the desk. Then her face became very white, and her hand trembled so that she could scarcely hold the paper. It was what she had so long looked for,—what would have set everything right in the old bitter days if only

it had been found. The few cramped, uneven words were as follows:—

‘This is my last will and testament. I leave Dalmore and Findowie to my nephew, Fergus Macleod, upon one condition,—that he marries my beloved daughter, Sheila Murray Macdonald, and adds the name of Macdonald to his own. If he will not fulfil these conditions, my former will, drawn up by Colquhoun, will stand good.

‘GRAHAM MACDONALD.’

As she read, the hot blood chased away the paleness from Sheila's neck and cheek and brow. She laid her arms down upon the table, and buried her burning, throbbing face upon it, and cried until she was weak and spent. It was not a pleasant discovery for a young girl. Graham Macdonald had not in this done well by the child he so loved. For there had been no spoken love between her and Fergus Macleod, and yet, in the interests of truth and right, the contents of this will must be divulged. Poor Sheila! her proud young heart had to steer its way through many bitter waters before it anchored in the haven of love.



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CHAPTER XL.

‘THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMIN’.’

But I dinna see the broom, wi' its tassels, on the lea,
Nor hear the lintie's sang o' my ain countrie.

GILFILLAN.



HE close of one of the sweet days of early summer in the far West. The soft air was resonant with the hum of the insect world, and laden with the delicate odours of budding leaf and bursting bloom. The maples had donned their loveliest attire; the sumach had its tender, bright shoots spread out in the sun, beech and oak and ash flaunted their emerald hues beside the sombre leafage of the pine. There were yellow buds on the stately golden rod, and the forest primeval was carpeted with a wondrous carpet of gaudy lilies, red and white and yellow, standing up bravely on their delicate but sturdy stems, and verily making the desert to blossom as the rose. The grass was living green on the rough roadsides, and the sparrows chirped noisily in every bough; and sometimes the dainty blue jay, vain of his pretty dress, would perch on the rail of the quaint snake-fence, and utter his cheery but not very musical note. The sky was crystal clear, shading to westward from palest amber to flaming red and gold. The masses of the forest trees stood out against it with startling clearness, and a soft mellow light lay on the clustering homesteads, as if shedding upon them a benison of

goodwill and peace. The fall wheat was green on the little cleared patches, and the healthy tops of the mangolds showing in other places between the stumps of the trees.

It had been no light labour to which the pioneers from Glenquich had set themselves; but their hearts did not fail them, for wherever they put in their ploughshare mother earth yielded them a bountiful return. The landscape was very flat, variegated only by the dark masses of the bush, with here and there a rolling breadth of rising ground, which could hardly be called a hillock.

The homesteads were primitive, but picturesque; the houses being built of substantial logs, welded together with rough cement, and roofed with shingles,—pieces of wood cut and laid after the manner of slates. The roomy barn, which included stable and byre and granary,—in a word, the whole ‘steading’ of a Scotch farm-place,—was built after the same style, and represented an extraordinary amount of labour. The several house and barn raisings in the township had been a source of great interest and amusement to the younger emigrants, though the expedition with which the older settlers wrought when they came to help, and the amount of laborious toil they put into the working hours, rather astonished some of the lazier members of the new community. Imitation is a good thing, and these barn raisings brought out the ‘smeddum’ of the Highland exiles as years of ‘daidlin’ at home would never have done. The roads were very rough and uneven; the ground in many places being swampy, a difficulty obviated by the laying of logs across the way. As time went on, and drainage became more common, the roads in the new township would improve. The principal road led direct from the little village to the nearest railway station, twenty-three miles distant.

The village, called so by courtesy only, consisted of one store, of that curious type seen nowhere but in the backwoods of a new country; a blacksmith’s shop; and a little frame house, which, from its shape and appearance, was evidently a place of worship. On this fine evening the village or township of Fergus Creek seemed to be in a state of unprecedented

liveliness. The little creek, a limpid, pellucid stream, flowing in a sandy bed, like the burn in the old song, 'wimpled through the clachan,' and the smiddy stood 'ayont it,' and at the smiddy door, the centre of an interested and excited throng, stood our old friend Donald Macalpine, the smith, looking more hale and hearty than he had ever done in Achnafauld. Donald had not changed his trade, for, of course, wherever there are a number of farms in a district, a smiddy is indispensable, so Donald felt himself so much at home, that if he had only had a 'reckin' lum,' as he said sometimes to Mary, he could hardly have believed himself away from the old Glen. But whether it was that Canadian wood burned more clearly than Highland peat, it is certain that the smiddy lum never bothered Donald at all. The smith was dressed in his best, as also were the others, whose faces were mostly familiar. From out the open door of Donald's pretty frame cottage, which had received a new coat of pink paint, which made it look very smart indeed, there came a very appetizing odour of all sorts of good things cooking for a feast. Presently, Mary herself, looking, oh! so sounsie and young, came out to the door, the gay ribbons of her cap fluttering excitedly about her flushed face.

'Ony word yet, Donald? The jeuks is dune to a turn, an' the kettle's beginnin' to bile in.'

'They canna' be lang noo, Mary, my woman,' Donald answered cheerily. 'Allooin' an hoor for the train bein' late, they should be here in aboot ten meenits.'

'Awa' ayont the road, then, lads; an' you, Cam'll Stewart, gar yer pipes play "The Cam'lls are Comin'" wi' a' yer nicht. Annie an' me an' Jeems's wife an' the weans 'll be daunerin' etter ye.'

Mary's hint was acted upon, and the company formed themselves into a kind of procession, and marched off down the road, and young Campbell Stewart, the third laddie of the former tenant of Turrich, put the pipes to his mouth, and blew the familiar blast which had so often awakened the echoes of the Glenquaich hills. He had on the bright Macdonald kilt, plaid and all; and every man in the township who possessed a kilt had got into it, and it was like a miniature Highland

regiment marching along the road. The whole clan had gathered in the clachan, all the women and the bairns too; bonnie Annie Stewart, young Jamie's wife, with a bairn in her arms and one at her skirts, and her mother-in-law too, who, though granny now, looked almost as young as Annie herself. James Stewart of Turrich had never ceased to bless the day which had brought him to the kindly, healthy land across the sea.

Though Mary Macalpine's face was wreathed in smiles, there was a suspicious dimness about her eyes, which indicated the working of an inward emotion. There was a nervousness about her, too, and again and again she broke away from the talk of the women to run into her own snug kitchen for another look at the table.

'If it had only been Maister Fergus hissel', Ailie Stewart, she said to James Stewart's wife. 'He tak's bite an' sup wi' a'boddy, an' is aye pleased, but it's anither thing to cook for the leddy o' Shonnen.'

'Dinna you vex yoursel', Mary, my woman,' Ailie answered gently. 'Efter sailin' on the sea, an' eatin' dry morsels in the train, an' the kind o' meat they gie ye here at railway stations, the leddy o' Shonnen will no' find fault wi' your table. Better nor her nicht relish it, for I never smelt a better smell.'

Mary laughed; but in she went again, for the sound of the pipes had turned evidently, and was now being borne on the swelling bosom of the wind straight towards the clachan.

'They're comin', Mary! we see the buggy on the tap o' the hill!' cried Ailie excitedly. 'Come awa', granny's doos,' she added to the bairns, and set off from the door.

But Mary did not follow. From the window-ledge she took a little flower-pot, in which, bowered among green moss, there stood up, brave and bonnie and strong, two yellow-eyed, pink-lipped gowans. This she set on the middle of the long low table, which was covered with white home-made bread and scones and oat cakes, and golden honey and firm yellow butter and delicious cheese, all made by loving hands in the township. Every household had sent something to Mary Macalpine's table that night to tempt the exiles from

over the sea. Mary's hands trembled as she touched the gowans. God alone knew with what love she had tended that sweet keepsake from her bairnie's grave. And when the first bud had become a bonnie flower, she had received it as a direct message of comfort from the heaven where her bairn was waiting for her. As she heard the din coming nearer the house, she ran into the parlour, and, breaking a wee bit heather from the big bunch which hung always above the mantelpiece, she divided it into two sprigs, and laid one on the plate at the head of the table and one on the right hand. Then she put the tea in the teapot, and, all trembling, went out to the door.

And there they were: the young Laird himself on his feet near the smiddy door, surrounded by all the folk, talking and laughing in the most delightful excitement. The buggy was close behind, and there sat Ellen Macleod, in the front seat beside James Stewart, with her veil up, and a smile of sunshine and peace upon her face. After the long, weary journey, her heart was touched inexpressibly by the welcome accorded to them by their ain folk; and though she knew it was for the boy's sake, she did not grudge him it, nor feel any qualms about her own reception. She had to win the folk, and she would. Jamie Stewart, sitting by her side, and hearing her talk as they drove, had felt like a man in a dream.

'Hulloa, Mary, old woman! There you are!'

Fergus strode from among the throng, and, gripping Mary's two hands firm and fast in his strong young grasp, bent from his tall height and kissed her twice; and then what a 'Hurrah!' broke from the people.

'He's my laddie, my ain laddie!' she said brokenly. 'Let me gang, see, an' speak to your mither. Ye'll excuse us, my leddy; you see, he was aye oor laddie in the Fauld.'

'I am his mother, and it does me good to see how he is beloved,' Ellen Macleod said; and when she alighted from the buggy, she took Mary's hands too, and looked into the honest face with a wistful smile. 'You have a welcome for me for my son's sake. I see it in your eyes.'

This fairly broke Mary down.

'Come in, come in! dinna speak, my leddy, but come in! The

tea's a' ready, an' yer bed's clean an' sweet wi' linen spun in the Fauld; an' see, there's the heather and the gowans frae Shian, an' a' things that's hamelike an' canny!—But guid Lord help me! Donald says I'm an auld fule, an' so I am. Come in, come in!

When Ellen Macleod saw the table spread with so much good cheer, and was ushered into the dainty little bed-chamber Mary had provided for her, and above all, as she saw the kindly light of welcome in the face of the smith's wife, her composure shook. Oh, how she had misunderstood and misjudged the folk, whose hearts were as pure as gold!

'I do not know what to say, Mrs. Macalpine. I feel your kindness in my heart. My boy will thank you. I trust everything to him.'

Then Mary knew that a great and wonderful change had taken place in the relations between mother and son, and her hands were very gentle as she helped the mistress of Shonnen off with her many wraps.

'It's a lang, weary journey, my leddy; but, my certy! ye are better aff than we were when we cam', for there's a guid meal o' meat waitin' ye. Sirce! when I cam', an' saw naething but trees an' trees an' better trees, and was telt we had to cut them doon to build a biggin' o', I felt gey queer. It's no' an ill country, ma'am, when ye get used to it. An' the sticks burn better nor the peat, though baith ways the fire's like a hungert bairn,—aye greetin' for mair. There's water, ma'am, to wash yer face; an' I'll dish up the jeuks that Rory Maclean shot twa days ago in the swamp, and they're mair tender than the grouse or patricks on Craig Hulich. An' to think that no' three weeks ago ye walkit the auld roads, an' saw the loch shinin' in the sun! But I maun awa'; I'm a stupid auld wife!'

'How mony hae ye room for, Mary, at the table?' cried Donald, putting his Tam o' Shanter round the door. 'The Laird'll no' sit doon his lane.'

'We could pit doon nine or ten. Bid the Laird wale them, an' I'll bring cups,' Mary answered back; and what a laughing and joking there was over the Laird's 'walin'! He chose all the old folks, and when they were gathered round the board

was himself the only young one among them. His mother sat by his right hand; and then, after Donald had asked the blessing, in a broken and quite inaudible voice, Fergus got up to his feet.

'Friends,' he said, and his manly voice shook, and the red flush of deep emotion spread all over his handsome face—'friends, I want to thank you in my own and my mother's name for'—

He came to a sudden stop, and then the awkward pause was filled by the sudden music of the pipes striking up the lively air of 'Lady Anne Lindsay.' So Fergus laughed, and sat down. Then the 'jeuks,' all brown and savoury and tender, were set before him to carve, and he was so hungry he made short work of them. Ellen Macleod sat very quietly by his side, sipping the delicious tea, and enjoying Mary's dainty morsels to the full, but not saying much. She was content to stay in the background and let the boy be first. But she was no restraint upon them, for the few words she spoke were so gentle and kind that they looked at her in wonder, and reproached themselves for the misgivings they had entertained about her coming. It was a merry, merry meal. What a questioning and answering! Fergus was sore put to it to speak and eat with all his might at once! As was to be expected, they were eagerly interested in all the Fauld news,—in Katie Menzies' marriage to young McBean, and poor Malcolm's misdoing, which had resulted in the untimely end of the factor. He had been a harsh taskmaster to them, but they genuinely deplored his grievous death. Late that night Fergus sat up round the fire, with the smith and James Stewart and old Rory Maclean, talking of the prospects for him in the place. They were of the brightest. There was a large farm, the greater part of which was cleared, and with a good house and barn attached, for sale at North East Hope, about six miles from Fergus Creek. The price was about three thousand pounds; and as Fergus had in hand, with his own and his mother's means, about two-thirds of that sum, there would be no difficulty about the purchase. The old settlers had been keeping their eye on it ever since they heard tell of the young Laird coming, and there was little to do but

see those who had the selling of it, and enter into possession. The owner had died suddenly, and his widow and daughter were anxious to realize, and go to Toronto to live.

In a very few weeks' time all these arrangements were made. Fergus and his mother saw and approved the place; the deed of purchase was drawn out and signed; and the end of June saw the little household from Shonnen settled among all the familiar furnishings in a roomy and comfortable frame farm-house, and Fergus Macleod a Canadian landowner in his own right.



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CHAPTER XLI

A MAIDEN'S HEART.

Alas! for the years that lie
Between love's reaping and sowing!

J. B. SELKIRK.



LADY AILSA was extremely puzzled over the *dénouement* of the interesting love affair between Sheila and Fergus Macleod. She could not understand it at all, and felt aggravated with the foolish young man for deliberately turning his back upon good fortune such as lies in the way of very few; and not good fortune only, but as sweet and winsome a wife as any man could ever hope to win. When she thought how much her own Alastair, to say nothing of half a dozen others, would have given for the chance, it made her feel very sore against the independent young scion of the house of Macdonald. But then she knew nothing of the undercurrents, for dearly as Sheila loved her aunt, there were some things she could not tell her. The secret of Fergus's fall was safe with the women who had witnessed it. Where the interests of their employers were concerned, Jane Cameron and Jessie Mackenzie could be as silent as the grave, so that eventful New Year's eve never became the talk of Amulree. Lady Ailsa knew perfectly well that Sheila cared for Fergus; her difficulty now was to understand the condition of the young man's mind

towards her. The very thought that her darling might have given the whole precious wealth of her heart unasked, and to an unappreciative or unresponsive soul, filled her with indignant sorrow.

She was sitting over her sewing in her own boudoir one cold, chill May afternoon, thinking over it all, with a little heightened colour in her face, and rather a vexed expression about her mouth. Sheila was a care to her; and it was perfectly plain that since the Macleods left Shonnen the child's spirits had deserted her. And yet she would not leave Dalmore, where she was moping and eating her heart out about something. Lady Ailsa was planning a little trip to the Riviera for herself and Sheila, and made up her mind that Alastair should spend a week or two with them there. For if Fergus had deliberately retired from the field, why, then, there was a fair chance for another, and why not Alastair, who, though too happy and sensible to grow morose and melancholy over one girl's refusal, would no doubt be only too glad if Sheila would relent? The very thought of such a happy ending brought a delicious smile to Lady Ailsa's face, and it was on her lips when the door opened suddenly, and Sheila herself came in. She had on her riding habit, but had put off her hat and gloves downstairs, and her hair was all blown about her face by the rough east wind, and there was the loveliest blush of the rose on her fair cheek.

'You witch! I was thinking of you. Did you divine what I wanted?' said Aunt Ailsa, with her warm greeting. 'But how dare you come to Murrayshaugh in that costume? When did you begin to make formal calls upon your relatives?'

'Never, auntie. Don't bother me. Let me sit down here, see, just at your feet,' said the girl wearily, 'and don't ask me a single question, or say anything. I'm going to speak by and by, Aunt Ailsa, after I am rested, and can find words.'

She threw herself on a stool at her aunt's feet, and, folding her arms on her knees, laid down her head, and a long, shivering sigh broke from her lips. Aunt Ailsa's kind eyes filled with keen concern. She saw the child's heart was breaking, for now that the transient flush brought by the wind's caress had faded, her face was quite pale, and her expression sad

almost to hopelessness. She did not speak, but laid her motherly hand above the girl's slender pale fingers, and Sheila caught it, and laid her cheek against it. So they sat in silence for a time.

'Aunt Ailsa,' came at length very low from Sheila's lips, 'do you think it makes God very angry, if sometimes, when we are very wretched, we think we would not mind very much though death came to end it all?'

'My Sheila, these are not fitting words from your lips,' Aunt Ailsa replied quite gravely, though her lips trembled. 'God has blessed you, my darling, above many.'

'Oh, I know He has, and I am not ungrateful,' was the girl's passionate answer. 'But sometimes, auntie, I think it would be so easy to be poor, and even not in good health, if other things were different. Is it wrong to think that I have too much care? I can never remember a time when something did not weigh upon my heart. I have never been quite happy, I think, since mamma and I lived down by the river. It is so hard to grow up.'

'I know what weighs upon your heart, my darling. I understand it all,' said Aunt Ailsa softly.

'Not quite, auntie,' returned Sheila quickly. 'You know some things, but not all. It was very hard to bear when they went away,' she added simply, and without affectation. 'But there is something else. It happened nearly three weeks ago, and I have been trying to think what would be the right thing to do, Aunt Ailsa. I have found papa's will.'

'Bless me! Sheila, are you always harping on that old fancy yet?'

'No. I have found it, and here it is, Aunt Ailsa. See, I have brought it to you to read, for I have nobody in the world now, but only you.'

She drew the folded scrap of paper from the bosom of her dress, and gave it into her aunt's hand. Lady Ailsa put on her eyeglass, and scanned the few words which were of such serious import to the girl at her knee.

'I never heard of such a thing!' she cried indignantly. 'It was wrong and cruel of Macdonald to do this, Sheila. I cannot

help it, if I speak harshly of the dead. Why did you go poking about in odd corners, seeking this to your own heart-break, child ?'

'I didn't poke; it came to me. I suppose the time had come,' said Sheila, with a dreary smile. Then her colour rose, and her lips trembled. 'Do you quite understand it, auntie—do you see the wretched, miserable position it puts me in? I am offered to Fergus Macleod, and he is bribed, as it were, to take me. There is no condition put upon me. Suppose I had to refuse him, he would be kept out of Dalmore, and could feel aggrieved. It is a shameful thing!'

'Shameful! It is a disgrace and a sin!' quoth Lady Ailsa hotly. 'Let me toss it into the fire. I wonder you did not do it at once, child.'

Sheila shook her head, and turned her face away to the window, and watched the green tree-tops bending to the wind.

'Sheila, tell me truly. I must know everything. Has Fergus ever spoken a word of love to you?'

'No, never,' Sheila answered, with her face still averted. 'But—but I know—at least I think—he would, if things were different.'

'You care for him, then, Sheila?'

'I am afraid I do, Aunt Ailsa, very much,' Sheila whispered; and the sweet colour flushed all her face again, and she was fain to hide it.

'Then there need not be much fuss or vexation about it, Sheila,' said Lady Ailsa, with a quiet smile. 'Mr Colquhoun need only write a few discreet words to our exile, then there will be the wedding chimes and the happy ending, and, I'm sure, very thankful will I be to get you off my hands. You don't know what a responsibility and care you are to me.'

But still Sheila only shook her head.

'I suppose he must be told?' she said at length, in a low, doubtful voice.

'In the interests of justice, if of nothing else, he must,' Lady Ailsa answered significantly.

'And what do you suppose he will do?'

'Take passage home in the next steamer, if he is in his right mind.'

'If I thought he would do that, Aunt Ailsa, I would go away somewhere, and hide myself for ever!' said Sheila passionately. 'It is a shame! It is just a bribe. I suppose few could resist it. Do you think Fergus could?'

'Sheila, I do not understand you. There is something you are keeping back,' said Lady Ailsa perplexedly. 'If you care for Fergus, and he cares for you'—

'But I am not sure. I only said he might, if things were different,' put in Sheila.

'And he cares for you,' repeated Aunt Ailsa steadily, 'there need be no fuss about it. As I said before, this is not a time to allow foolish scruples to stand in the way. If you do, the happiness of both your lives may be lost.'

There was a long silence. Then Sheila rose to her feet, and gathered the skirt of her habit in her hand. Her face was quite pale and grave again. Her aunt thought she looked old beyond her years.

'The case, as we understand it, stands thus, then, Aunt Ailsa,' she said quietly. 'I am in possession of Dalmore, but if Fergus Macleod should wish to marry me, it is his. If I should not wish to marry him, I may still remain in possession, and enjoy myself as well as a usurper can. The only thing, then, to satisfy justice will be to offer myself and Dalmore to Fergus Macleod, and await the result,—a very nice, enjoyable condition of mind to be in. I can amuse myself during the next few weeks in trying to anticipate his decision. Aunt Ailsa, don't look at me so strangely. I am not very wretched, only it is so funny and dreary to be as I am.'

She drew herself up with a slight defiance, and pushed back her bright hair from her brow with a quick, nervous touch. Lady Ailsa's whole heart ached for the child, and yet she saw that uttered sympathy at that moment would break her down.

'Suppose we look at it from the ludicrous side, Sheila,—and it is very ludicrous, the way poor Dalmore has been tossed about,'

she said, with a smile. 'You are going to have a very original love affair, my dear.'

'Not original at all,—perfectly horrid!' cried Sheila, with a little passionate stamp of her foot. 'Never was girl tried as I am. I have a good mind to marry Ian or Alastair, if he will have me.'

'Alastair won't, my dear. There is only one man in the world for you, and you know it. Are you going to leave this in my hands, then, Sheila?'

'No; Mr. Colquhoun has seen the will, of course, and he is waiting my instructions. I will write to him to-night, and then, I suppose, I must just wait. Good-bye, auntie; forgive me for troubling you. No, don't ask me to stay, nor be kind to me at all. Just let me go away and fight out my own battle. It will all come right in the end. Good-bye.'

A hasty kiss, and the child was gone before her aunt could detain her. It had not been a satisfactory interview, and Lady Ailsa was left convinced in her own mind that there was something between Fergus and Sheila she did not understand.

Next day Mr. Colquhoun received his instructions, and a letter was sent to Fergus Macleod. It contained no superfluous writing, nothing but the lawyer's notification that the copy of his uncle's last will was endorsed. Then Sheila sat down to wait, and what that waiting meant for her no human being ever knew but Fergus, to whom she spoke of it reluctantly, in the happy after-time. This was a test for Fergus. It was to prove to Sheila what was really in him,—what depth and earnestness of purpose possessed the young man's soul. She was torn between two hopes, two desires. Love hoped that the message would bring the wanderer across the sea; but something else, the nobler side of her character as a woman, hoped that it would be—not yet. She prayed that he might be guided, that he would show himself as noble as the ideal to which Sheila hoped he would yet attain. It was a time of curious, searching trial for the girl; it brought her very near that Heaven from which her strength came. Discipline was making a very perfect and exquisite character out of Sheila Macdonald. During the interval Lady Ailsa saw her frequently, but the subject was not

again mentioned between them. Lady Ailsa was scarcely less anxious about the result than Sheila herself. It was the middle of June before Fergus Macleod's letter came to Dalmore. It was brought to Sheila in the drawing-room one sunny morn, and the servant saw her hand tremble when she saw the thin foreign envelope lying on the salver. She sat with it in her hand for a few minutes before she opened it. Her face was pale, her eyes troubled and heavy, her heart beating wildly. The words written within might mean so much or so little. At length she broke the seal, and these were the words she read:—

‘SUNSHINE HILL, FERGUS CREEK, ONTARIO,
May 31st, 18—

‘MY DEAR SHEILA,—I received Mr. Colquhoun's letter yesterday. I have already written to him. You will allow me, I know, to say a few words to you; although I have a feeling that it is a breach of my vow to address you so soon. It will be the last time, until, as I said, I can come and stand without shame in your presence. I think that hour will come some day. But for that hope and that resolve life would be very hard for me. You know as well as I can tell you, that I regret that the will should ever have been written, or when written found. It is not a just will; it might make a great deal of misery. As it is, I pray it may make no difference to you. You know, Sheila, without me telling you, what is the hope in my heart. You know that the world does not hold for me anything so precious as you. Dare I tell you this, Sheila, with the memory of the last night of the year before me? I dare, because I must now. But I will not come back to tell you this in words until I have redeemed the past—until I have made myself worthier. I shall never be wholly worthy. If, when that time comes, Sheila, you can trust me for all time, God knows what it will be for me. But if not, or if in the interval of waiting you should see some one to whom you could give the trust I would ask, I will try not to be cast down. It has been a blessing to me that I ever knew you. As to the will, and the disposing of Dalmore, I refuse to have anything to do with it. In the meantime, I hope

you will continue to be the blessing of the place. It has no interest for me now, except in so far as it concerns you. I ask you to forgive me if I have said too much. I could not have said less, I think, and made you understand. We are settled here on our own farm. My mother is happy, and the future is bright with promise. She knows all that is in my heart. I love my mother next to you. Strange that I should presume to write of love to you, but distance and circumstances are accountable for unexpected actions. I shall trespass no more till the time comes when I can stand an equal before you, and, if you are free, ask for your love. Give me your prayers, Sheila, and sometimes a thought. All my life and hopes and aims are bound up in you. I must lay down my pen. I could say so much more. It is not easy to stop. May God bless and take care of you. Sheila! I say it in deep reverence.—And I am, while I live, yours devotedly,

‘FERGUS MACLEOD.’

The June sun lay bright and golden on the bent head, on the sweet, downcast face, radiant with the sunshine of love. A load was lifted from off the child's shoulders; her heart was filled with that deep, unutterable gladness which comes only once. By and by, Fergus had his answer. It was very short, but it sufficed:—

‘DEAR FERGUS,—You will find me waiting when you come.
‘SHEILA.’

And so the probation began.

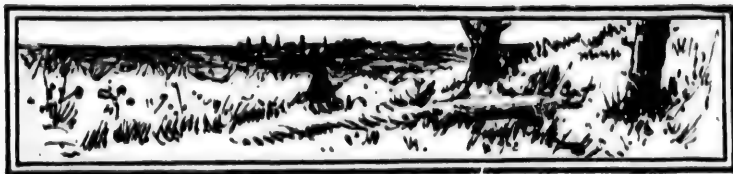


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CHAPTER XLII.

'A JUDEECIOUS FRICHT.'

The dear old places—

So full of memories for you and me!

J. B. SELKIRK.



NO letters passed between these young people during their probation. They were very loyal. Old Time was to work his will with them, but whatever change he might make in other places or in other hearts, his flight would find them the same. But they were not absolutely without news of each other, for Alastair and Fergus kept up a kind of desultory correspondence, and so there was a bond kept between the old world and the new. Fergus was making his way steadily, and prospering, Alastair could make out from his letters, though there was nothing of the spirit of boasting in them. He was farming at Sun Shine Hill on the most approved principles, and had, indeed, inaugurated a new agricultural era in the district. He had not only raised the good land on his farm to the highest pitch of cultivation, but by degrees had redeemed the swamps by drainage, and so added considerably to his estate. He threw himself heart and soul into his work, and, having a quick perception, shrewd foresightedness, and promptness of action, he bade fair to become a rich and successful man. He began to turn his attention to stock-raising, and had some of the best blood sent

out to him, which opened up a new and fine field of enterprise. These things, of course, did not become accomplished facts all at once; they were the growth of years. And here, perhaps, Fergus erred a little in his high-mindedness and independent resolve. In his consuming anxiety to do well, and to have something worthy to show as the result of the years, he forgot what the waiting might be for Sheila. His life was full of interest, of engrossing work and occupation; hers was empty, and, in a sense, purposeless, and the time seemed to her fearfully long. Sometimes the child grew sick of hope deferred. Dalmore was no longer a source of unceasing anxiety and care. Angus McBean the younger was such a true, kind, and faithful steward, that there was no longer any need for the mistress's constant supervision. The relations between Dalmore and the Glen were of the most delightful description. So, in a sense, Sheila's life became purposeless, and Aunt Ailsa was not at times without deep anxiety about her. The child seemed to be standing still. It was as if the development of her character had been arrested,—as if she had lost hold of the purpose of life. She stayed a great deal at Murrayshaugh, and generally wintered abroad with her aunt and uncle. Sir Douglas was in poor health, and the third winter after Fergus went away, he died at San Remo, and Alastair became Laird of Murrayshaugh. The happy, merry household was becoming sadly thinned. The lads were scattered,—one at Woolwich, one at Harrow, and one studying in Edinburgh. The other two were still at Glenalmond, though Gordon, the younger, was showing signs of restlessness, and threatened to emigrate to Canada after Fergus Macleod. Sir Alastair bore his honours meekly; there was no fear of his popularity among the folk. He was dear to young and old, gentle and simple alike. He was engaged to be married to one of the bright English cousins who had been one of Sheila's companions for a year at school, and Lady Ailsa was looking forward to abdicating in her favour. She had many a laugh about it, dear kind heart! she was thoroughly happy over it, and would make a snug home for herself and the younger boys not too far away. And thus matters stood five years after Fergus went away. At Easter, young Gordon

rebelled altogether at going back to Glenalmond; and, after a long talk with his mother, Sir Alastair decided to take a trip to Canada himself, in order to see what prospect there was in the new country for his young brother. He had another errand, too, which was spoken of but briefly between his mother and himself.

'And you can see for yourself what Fergus Macleod is doing out there,' Lady Ailsa said. 'I am rather doubtful about him myself, Alastair. It is unlike a young man to wait so long and make no sign. It makes me sore to look at Sheila. And to think what matches she could have made in the interval! But for that young renegade we would have seen our Sheila with a coronet on her brow.'

'Which would have been irksome to her, mother, unless Macleod had put it on,' laughed Alastair. 'I confess I don't share your fears about Fergus. He's a fearsome, determined chap when he likes, and I can understand just how he feels. But I confess I think Sheila is wearying.'

'If you tell him that, or even hint at it, Alastair, you stupid boy! I don't know what I shall do to you.'

'Oh, mother, what do you take me for? Am I going to make our Sheila cheap to anybody?' queried Alastair, in his boyish way. 'No, no; trust me, I'll only give Fergus a "judeecious fricht," and won't I enjoy it?'

Lady Ailsa smiled then. She could trust her big honest son with Sheila's interests, so there was no more said. Sheila's face flushed all over, and the tears sprang in her eyes, when Alastair rode up to Dalmore to tell his errand and say good bye. Having made up his mind, he took out his passage at once, and everybody was astonished to hear of his sudden resolve. Sheila had been in the south country, spending Easter with a friend, and so had heard nothing of it until Alastair came to say good-bye. He talked a great deal about exploring the country and its prospects for the sake of Gordon, and only said, as he shook hands at the door,—

'I'll likely see Macleod, Sheila, if I am in his neighbourhood. Have you any message?'

But Sheila answered quite quietly, and, Alastair thought, with

a touch of coldness, 'No, I have no message. Don't stay away too long, Alastair, or Aunt Ailsa and I will be miserable.'

There was a lump in Alastair's throat as he looked at the sweet, pale young thing in her black frock, and he mentally resolved to make the 'judeecious fricht' as rousing as possible. So he kissed his cousin, and went his way. He sent no warning of his coming to the friends over the sea; but, in spite of his careless, indifferent words to Sheila, he made straight as an arrow from New York to Ontario, and to the nearest station for Sunshine Hill. The railway had been extended since Fergus went, and the nearest station was now within eight miles of the farm. Alastair was amazed to find that there was not a horse or conveyance of any kind to be obtained for love or money at the station. But what was eight miles to him, accustomed as he was to doing his fifteen or twenty over hill and moor at home? So, after getting directions for Sunshine Hill, he left his luggage, and started off. It was a very warm afternoon. Summer had rushed on apace after a tardy spring, and all vegetation was in an advanced state. The road was terribly dusty. Alastair sunk to the ankles at every foot, and before he had gone two miles began to feel out of sorts. He had rather admired the country as he came along. The grass had not yet been burned up by the intense heat, and all the peach and apple orchards were in bloom. But, as he laboured along the dusty road, with the hot, strong sun beating upon him, and nothing to relieve the glare, he muttered something under his breath which sounded uncommonly like 'Beastly country!' Tired out at length, he sat down on the fence, and got a cigar with which to solace himself. 'Believe I'll sit here till sundown,' he said complacently, his irritation disappearing under the genial influence of his cigar. 'Hulloa! here's something coming. If it's a gig, or even a cart, I'm in luck.' It was a buggy, which to Alastair seemed a curious-looking affair; but the horse was a smart trotter, and the driver a pleasant-looking elderly man, evidently a farmer. He drew rein as a matter of course when he approached the stranger.

'Good-day. Going far, eh?'

'To a place called Sunshine Hill. Do you know it?'

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'Of course I do; I'm going within half a mile of it. Get in. Warmish day.'

'Rather; thank you, I'm in luck,' said Alastair, as he jumped into the comfortable seat by the driver's side. The leather cover was up, and it was delicious to be sheltered from the glaring sun.

'Stranger here, I see,' said the driver very freely.

'Yes, just come over.'

'From the old country? Thought so. Any relation of Mr. Macleod's?'

'Only a friend. Do you know him?' asked Alastair interestedly, for here was a fine chance of hearing some independent testimony about his friend.

'Know him? We all do. He's one of our prominent men. He's in everything—everything good, I mean. He's a tip-top fellow, and the best farmer I ever see'd. I've been in the farming line myself for forty years, but he's learned me a thing or two.'

'Has he really? He is a successful man, then?'

'He's a genius. I'll tell you what. They don't think much of the old country gentry here, but he's thrown them all off their calculations. It takes a man with all his senses about him to serve Mr. Macleod.'

'Is he so hard on them?'

'Oh, bless me! no; but he knows everything, and he won't let a slovenly bit of work slip. I don't want no better recommendation with a man than that he has served at Sunshine Hill, and my mistress will tell you the same about the hired girls. Mrs. Macleod's a real lady, but she knows what's what. Come out thinking to settle, eh? Fine country this. Look at that wheat, sir. Did you ever see its marrow? This is the kind of weather, now. Did you ever see sunshine like this in Scotland? No, you never did. I'm from Scotland myself; out thirty-three year come September. Me and the mistress was home last year for the first time, and we couldn't bide for the rain. Do you know what I told them at Carmunnock afore I came away? I just bade them get Scotland roofed in or I can' back. Ha! ha!'

The old farmer laughed, so did Alastair. His heart was light. The news of Fergus was good.

'Ay, he's a fine chap, Mr. Macleod. He's foremost in all that's good. They're going to make him the reeve of the township next election.'

'What's that?'

'A kind of general supervisor of all the interests of the district. He's young, but he's fit, very fit. See, yonder's his barn. You can't see the house; it's in the orchard at the back of the barn. We'll be there in a crack. If you're going to stay a bit at the Hill, we'll be seeing you at our place. You're gentry, I see; but we're a' ae kind here,' said the farmer facetiously.

'I'll be sure to come, thank you,' said Alastair sincerely. 'Am I to get out here?'

'Ay, an' cut across the mangolds. You'll see the house when you get by the bush there. Good-day. You'll never settle in the old country, sir, after ye've been here,' said the farmer, with a laugh. 'Good-day.'

Alastair lifted his cap, and vaulted the primitive-looking snake-fence at a bound. The old man had put him in the best of humours, and he was full of delightful anticipation of his meeting with Fergus. It was nearly six o'clock now, and the sun, veering westward, had lost the fierceness of his heat. Shadows were creeping over the bush, and long, slanting yellow lines of light lay athwart the shingled roof of the barn. Alastair could see it quite well, as his long legs took him quickly over the dry furrows between the green bushy mangold tops. There were some cows wandering about the yard, lazily whisking their tails, and a lamb, with a tinkling bell on its neck, trotting about, nibbling the green grass near the fence. It was a peaceful, plentiful picture; and when a few steps more brought the stranger within sight of the picturesque house, with its wide verandah hung with green creepers and the purple clusters of the clematis, and surrounded on all sides by the wealth of the apple bloom, he stood still for a moment, and said aloud,—

'By Jove! not bad for the backwoods. It's a perfect picture.'

Presently, from out the wide-open doors of the barn there came a big stalwart figure, in shirt sleeves, and a big straw hat slouching over his shoulders,—Fergus himself, in his working garb, his honest face as brown as a russet apple with the sun. He caught sight of the trespasser in his mangold field, and put up his hand to his eyes to try and make him out. Alastair grinned, and his heart beat a little faster as he quickened his pace. He had a breadth of pasture to cross between the mangold field and the yard fence, and as the distance between him and the waiting figure lessened, he saw quite well a curious change come upon the face of his old friend. At last they were within hail, and Alastair's ringing voice, a trifle less steady than usual, broke the drowsy stillness.

'Hulloa! Fergie lad, anything to say to an old chum?'

'Alastair, as I'm alive!'

The face of Fergus twitched, his firm under lip quivered, and for a moment his keen blue eye grew dim. Then, in silence, the two men gripped hands, and looked into each other's eyes. It was a moment of deep emotion for both, for they had been like brothers in the old time.

Alastair was the first to speak.

'Never a word of welcome, old chap—eh?' he said, with a comical smile.

'Alastair, you—you duffer! not to write!' Fergus managed to say at last; but the light in his face was good to see.

'You're not sorry, then, to see a kent face?'

'Sorry!' Fergus's mouth twitched again, and he gripped Alastair by the arm, and began to march him towards the house.

'When did you come? Where have you come from? What made you think of coming? What do you want? Did you come to see me?' Fergus asked all those questions in a breath, and Alastair answered them all in his own fashion, which made the glad light deepen in his friend's eyes.

'Shut up! I want my tea, or dinner, or something. I'm famished. Here's your mother.'

Alastair took off his hat, as Mrs. Macleod, attracted by the

sound of voices through the open door, came out on the verandah.

'How do you do, Mrs. Macleod? Any room for a tramp? Too bad, wasn't it, to steal a march on you?'

'Mr. Murray—Sir Alastair, I mean!'

Helpless surprise sat on the face of Ellen Macleod, but in a minute she recovered herself, and had a welcome for the stranger from over the sea which did his heart good. She looked at Fergus, and when she saw the expression on his face, she knew what it had been to him to leave the old land and the true friends there.

'Is it you, Alastair, really?' he asked for the sixth time, after they had got into the house, and the tempting odour of the supper was about them. 'Don't vanish away. I'm afraid to lift my eyes off you, in case I discover that you've been an optical illusion.'

'A very substantial illusion, as Mrs. Macleod will find presently when I get at the table,' laughed Alastair. 'I say, what a fine place you have here, and how immense it is to see you! I tell you, I'm jolly glad I came.'

Just the same old Alastair, full of fun and boyish chaff. The old university slang sounded like sweetest music in the ears of Fergus. He dared not trust himself to speak, somehow.

'I tell you I'm a fool, Alastair. I can't do anything but look at you. Mother, is not it grand to see him?'

'It is indeed, my son,' Ellen Macleod answered; and as she passed by Alastair's chair, she laid her hand on his broad shoulder, and smiled down upon him, and that motherly smile, so unlike anything he had ever seen before on the face of Ellen Macleod, completely upset Alastair, and he gave three cheers there and then. And after that the happy supper began, but nobody ate except Alastair, and he spoke all the time with his mouth full. The face of Fergus was quite a study. In his wildest dreams Alastair had never imagined the meeting would be quite so glorious. In the sweet gloaming that evening, over a pipe of peace and love on the verandah chairs, the two friends talked over everything, past, present, and future, until it grew

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quite dark, and the shy young moon came up behind the dark belt of the bush, and the owls began to hoot and the coons to cry in the swamp away down in the hollow. Everything, I said; but the name of Sheila was not mentioned, though the minds of both were full of her, and each knew it.

'I say, Fergie,' said Alastair at length, throwing away the end of his third cigar, 'when are you coming over?'

'Some day,' Fergus answered.

'How long will some day be of coming?' Alastair asked dryly.

'I don't know yet. I haven't made up my mind.'

'Oh, well, if there is nothing particular you want to see about, I daresay it doesn't matter much,' Alastair remarked, with a fine indifference, which was yet full of suggestiveness.

Fergus caught at it at once.

'There are two or three things I am anxious about, but the time has not come yet,' he said rather hastily.

'When it comes, take care it is not too late for anything you may have set your heart on.'

Fergus started, and a look of apprehension crossed his bronzed face.

'Do you know what I think, Fergus? that you are an ass, and richly deserve to be told it,' was Alastair's next characteristic remark.

'What for?'

'Most things, but one particularly. I'll tell you what, if you don't look up Dalmore before long, I wouldn't give a fig for your chance.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. No, I have no more information to give. I've thrown out the hint. Maybe I came expressly to give it. You're an ass, Fergie, because you're throwing away—well, the sweetest, jolliest girl in the world, and I only wish I had the chance. There! it's out now. I say, Mrs. Macleod, when do you lock up—eh? Isn't it nearly ten? I feel uncommonly sleepy.'

Alastair rose lazily, and sauntered through the open door into the parlour. He looked back with a grin after Fergus, who

took the three verandah steps at a bound, and disappeared among the apple trees. Then Alastair sat down beside Mrs. Macleod, and had a long, delightful chat with her. But he saw Fergus no more that night.

The 'judeecious fricht' had taken due effect.



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CHAPTER XLIII.

LOVE'S CROWN.

They were blest beyond compare,
When they held their trysting there,
Among the greenest hills shone on by the sun.
SHAIRPE.

ROB MACNAUGHTON, the stocking-weaver, was lying ill in his bed at Achnafauld. The rheumatics were not improving with age; for months now the loom had been silent in the s'op, and Rob seldom able to move farther than between the bed and the fire. But the brain was still busy, and his 'sangs' were the delight of the mistress of Dalmore. He had a new one every time she came to see him. And that was very often; for Sheila, as of yore, was ever to be found where her gentle presence and her beneficent hand could be of any service to others less blessed than herself. Rob's worship of her was a very perfect kind of thing, though it did not find expression in a multitude of words. She was so absolutely free and at home with him, and he with her, there was no subject under the sun they did not discuss. Rob Macnaughton knew more of the inner heart of the young Lady of Dalmore than any other human being. They talked often of the exile who lived in the hearts of both; and Rob was fain, fain to look upon his face and touch his hand again. He had sometimes thoughts of writing to him, and would have done it

had the rheumatic hand permitted; but though it was very pleasant to have Sheila write out his songs for him, he could not have asked her to put on paper what was in his heart for Fergus. It too nearly concerned her. Rob had a keen perception. He knew the curious, tender thrill of the sweet young voice when they spoke of Fergus, and it grieved his heart to see the wistfulness creep to her bright eye, that far-away look which told of the hunger of the heart. He was sore puzzled to understand what still kept the bairns apart, especially as Fergus was doing well and making money in America. But, of course, that was never spoken of. Rob could only wait and hope for the fulfilment of the greatest desire of his heart, to see Fergus Macleod and Sheila man and wife in Dalmore. He was greatly interested, of course, to hear of Sir Alastair Murray's trip to America, and to know that he had met with all the Glenquaich folks, and found them in such prosperous circumstances. Alastair was making quite a tour of the new world; he had found his Canadian welcome so sweet that he had made quite a visitation at Sunshine Hill. But September found him making tracks for home again, and Sheila came along to the Fauld in the lovely gloaming one night to tell Rob his ship had arrived at Liverpool, and that he would be home next day at the latest.

'I'll bring him along when he comes up, Rob,' she said, 'and you can ask him everything you can think of. Won't that be far better than my telling?'

'I'll can speer mair particular, maybe,' Rob admitted. 'D'ye think he'll be lang o' comin'?''

'No. I am going down to Murrayshaugh in the morning. I may stay till Saturday, and I'll make my cousin bring me up early in the day, and after lunch we'll come along. Will that do, Rob?'

'Ay, brawly. Ye'll be as fain as I am, likely, to hear the news. But it will be guid news, of that I am sure.'

'Oh, so am I. Won't it be pleasant to hear him tell what he actually saw? It is so different seeing the way of life there, so much more satisfactory than hearing about it.'

A slight tremble shook the sweet young voice, and Rob knew

that her heart was sore. Old, rugged, eccentric though he was, the secret of that maidenly heart was not hid from the stocking-weaver, and he felt a great rebelling for his bairn. 'Well, I must go, Rob, and ask for wee Nellie at the smith's,' said Sheila. 'Nine bairns, Rob! What would Donald and Mary say if they saw so many crowded into their old house? Mary would call it a "potch," wouldn't she?' Sheila laughed, and Rob's eye twinkled.

'Are ye ridin', my wee leddy?' he asked.

'Yes; don't you know my habit yet, Rob?'

'Maybe; I ken it gars ye look bonnie. Ye are like the straightest birk in Shian woods,' said the stocking-weaver, looking admiringly at the slim yet stately young figure. Sheila laughed again. Her heart had grown lighter. She felt happier than she had done for some months, perhaps because news of the exiles were so near at hand.

'Oh, Rob! you make me quite ashamed. Good-night now; mind and take this before you go to bed. See, I will just make it all ready for you.'

She lifted the lid of the little basket, which Rob sometimes said could find its own way to the Fauld, and took out a dainty little pudding, and a bottle of cream, which she poured into a cup, and set it all ready for Rob, with the spoon and the plate lying to his hand. Had she no prevision, I wonder, of the eyes which watched her through the little window, watched her with a passionate light of love in them which might have stirred her heart? With a kind good-night, at last she gathered up her habit and stepped out of the house. The gloaming had merged into darkness, but there was a big red moon lying behind the hill, the moon the reapers love. Sheila's pony was browsing quietly at the burn-side. She took the bridle loosely over her arm, and, stepping across to the smith's door, asked for the ailing baby. Then, from out the shadows of Rob's corner, a tall figure stepped with one hasty stride and entered the stocking-weaver's door. Rob looked up at the hasty intrusion, and somehow, when his eye fell on the familiar and dearly-loved face, he was not conscious of the surprise so unexpected an apparition might have caused.



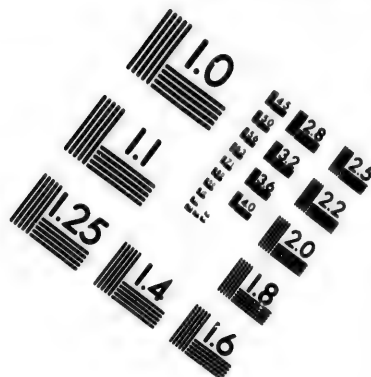
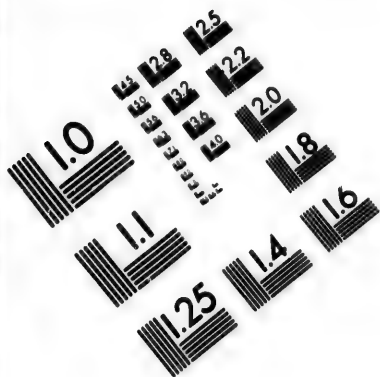
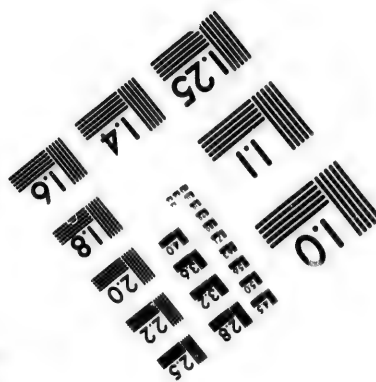
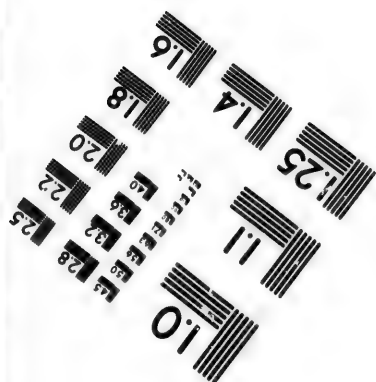
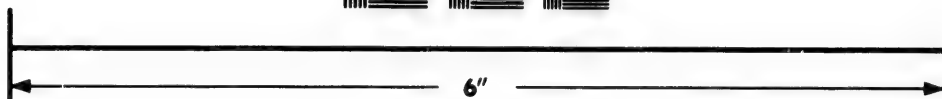
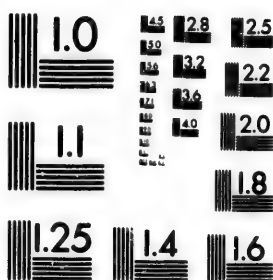


IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (MT-3)



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'Is't you, lad, or a wraith sent to warn me o' my end or yours?' he asked, leaning heavily on his elbow out of the bed.

'It's me, Rob, come back,' said the unmistakeable tones of Fergus Macleod's own voice. 'Just one grip, man, and I'm away. You know where.'

'She's in the smith's, sir,' Rob answered; and though Fergus's iron grip nearly brought the tears to his eyes with the pain of his maimed hand, he never uttered a groan.

'I know. Wish me good luck, Rob, and let me off. I'll be here again to-morrow.'

So saying, Fergus wrung his hand again, and disappeared as quickly as he had come. Then Rob lay back in his bed, and wiped the sweat-drops from his brow. He was wildly excited, and made a new song before he slept,—a song, he always said, which was the masterpiece of his life.

The pony was standing by the smith's open door, so Fergus went round by the end of Rob's house and out on the road. He did not know very well what to do. To speak to Sheila suddenly, or even to let him see her on the road, might startle her. He felt quite at a loss how to proceed. But speak with her that very night, that hour if possible, he must. He had endured the keenest torture waiting till Alastair should be ready to accompany him home. Alastair would not hurry himself for anybody, least of all for Fergus, and told him plainly he need not be so desperately impatient after he had waited philosophically so long, when nobody asked or wanted him to wait at all. There was truth in what Alastair said,—he had indeed teased his old chum unmercifully on the voyage. Fergus took everything in such terrible earnest, it amused Alastair intensely.

Presently, the short, sharp click of hoofs gave warning of Sheila's approach. Fergus looked helplessly round. There was no escape, unless he stepped the drystone dyke and hid himself behind it. So he just walked on rather stupidly in the middle of the white road until the pony came up.

'Fine evening,' Sheila said, in her quick, pleasant way. 'Is that you, Peter Fraser?'

Then Fergus stood still in the middle of the road, and Sheila drew rein sharply, and her face became very white in the moonlight.

'Don't be afraid, Sheila; it is I, Fergus Macleod. I came home with Alastair this afternoon, and when I went to Dalmore they told me you were at the Fauld, so I came.'

'Oh!'

Sheila's breath came in a quick, short gasp; and Fergus saw her tremble. Had he dared, he would have put a strong right arm about the dear figure, but not yet. He did not know, indeed, whether he would ever have the right to do that. Alastair had succeeded in frightening him in earnest, for he had never given him the smallest satisfaction about Sheila, except to reiterate his assurance that he had better look after his chance.

'Have you nothing to say to me, Sheila?' Fergus asked at length, when the deep silence became intolerable. Sheila's face was bent very low over Rob Roy's shaggy neck, and her lips were silent. Oh, how sweet the perfect curve of neck and cheek and brow seemed to Fergus, standing by her side.

'Of course I am glad, Fergus,' she said at last, and raised her head. Her smile was radiant, and she gave him her two hands, and he bent down and kissed them. Then he took Rob Roy's bridle over his arm, and began to walk by the pony's side, with his hand touching Sheila's habit, and for a little time there was nothing more said.

'Shall we go the old road, Sheila? it is quieter,' asked Fergus, when they came to the turn of the Corrymuckloch road. Sheila nodded, and they went on in silence again,—a silence which was golden. All the passionate speeches which had been so near the lips of Fergus when the ocean rolled between, were swept away by the deep joy her own presence caused.

'Why did you not write? Did you make up your mind to come all at once?' Sheila asked at length, in a low voice.

'No; since ever Alastair came out I intended to come. I was afraid to write.'

'Afraid! of what?'

'Afraid lest the news would not be pleasant to you. I wanted to see for mys lf. I thought if I saw your face I would know.' Sheila did not ask what he thought now.

'It is five years, Sheila, since I went away,' he said at last.

'I thought it ten,' Sheila said simply; and Fergus's hand moved a little, till his fingers touched her arm. But still he feared to speak.

'May I get down, Fergus? I should like to walk a little. O no, thank you.'

She had vaulted lightly from the saddle before Fergus could lift her, and, fastening up Rob Roy's bridle, she let him wander off at his own sweet will. He was a discreet beast, and accustomed to all his young mistress's vagaries of mind. So they walked on a little way in silence,—a silence embarrassing, though passing sweet. Love's barrier was in the way. In the depth of his strong feeling Fergus could not find words to bridge it.

Presently Sheila looked round, and gave a little exclamation. 'Oh, just look at the light on the loch!'

It was indeed a fairy picture; the silver sheet gleaming in the broad white moonlight under a deep blue starlit sky, the dark hills encompassing it like a watchful guard.

'It is not cold, Sheila; will you stand a little at this gate?' said Fergus, after a moment; and Sheila stood still, with her round arm lying on the upper bar, and her face turned towards the Glen. Fergus, looking at it, thought the sweet outline more sharply defined, and saw a weary curve about the mouth which stabbed him to the heart. Sheila had not been happy in Dalmore any more than he in Canada. But he had yet to learn why she was not happy. He dared not believe that it was on account of him. 'I have come back, Sheila, as I said I would,' he began, in full, earnest, manly tones. 'When I went away, I said a great deal about coming back wealthy, and with something to lay at your feet. I have nothing except a clean record for five years. In that time I have honestly tried, with God's help, to live as He would have me live, and as *you* would like me to live. I have tried to live so that the

people among whom I lived would not be any the worse of my presence.'

'But better—much better, Alastair told me,' Sheila said, and her face was all aglow. She knew nothing of coquetry or affectation. She loved Fergus, and he was by her side, seeking her love. She would give it to him, not grudgingly, but out of the fulness of her heart.

'Now that I have come back, Sheila, when I looked on the old place, and saw the light on our hills, and most of all, when I saw your face, I knew that life holds nothing for me more than what is here. You know me, Sheila,—all I have been and am. Will you bridge the great gulf between your beautiful life and mine, and give me yourself? I can't speak about my love. I will prove it to you, if you will try me, unworthy though I am.'

It was no dishonour to his manhood that his voice shook and his eye grew dim. Sheila never spoke, but her smile became divine, and she moved close to him and laid her bright head on his broad breast; and when he clasped her, as a man clasps Heaven's best gift, her hands met about his neck, and her soft cheek touched his. And so, among their own hills, within sight of the loch and the clachan, with which were interwoven the bright memories of bairn days, these two entered upon that new life in which God permits His creatures to taste of heaven.

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And so Love the Omnipotent healed all old sores, made rough places plain, and smoothed the tangled skein into a web of silken sheen. Fergus Macleod left the Glen no more until he took his wife with him. There was no reason why the marriage should be delayed. Sheila, who had found the waiting so dreary, did not say nay. She had an absolute trust in her young lover; she had proved him to the uttermost; and she was willing—nay more, unutterably glad—to give herself to him without a question or a doubt. Fergus accepted this trust, which always brings out all that is best and most worthy in a man, with a humble and yet confident heart. These weeks

before the wedding were a dream of happiness which they thought could never be excelled. They had so much to tell, so much to speak of. Sheila's beautiful and simple life needed no revealing; but Fergus told her all that was in his own soul. He had a high ideal, towards the attainment of which he would strive with all the manly might God had given him. To live that life nobly, to do to the utmost whatever duty lay to his hand, to accept every responsibility as from God,—when such was Fergus Macleod's estimate of life's purpose, I marvel not that Sheila went forth by her young husband's side with a heart filled to the brim with womanly pride and unspeakable trust. His care for her was a thing of which I cannot write. She was more precious to him than life; so, in the shelter of that brave and stalwart arm, we can leave our Sheila safe.

They were married in the drawing-room at Dalmore on the fifteenth day of October, and on the twenty-third sailed from Liverpool for New York. The honeymoon was to be spent at Sunshine Hill, where the mother's heart was yearning over them, and waiting for their coming. It was not like going to a strange land, Sheila said laughingly, for wherever Donald and Mary Macalpine were, there would be a bit of home for anybody from Glenquaich.

They spent the winter in Canada; and in the spring, when the trees were in bud, and the primroses yellow on the banks of the burn, they came home to their own. That was a great day for the Glen. And Ellen Macleod was with them,—a sweet-faced, gentle, kindly woman, who worshipped her new daughter with a devoted love. She abode with them till the festivities of their home-coming were over, and then retired to her own house of Shonnen, from which she could look across to the sunlit windows of Dalmore. They asked her to share their home; but she, being wise, kept to her own biggin', but spent many a long day at the old house, and rejoiced over the bairns there with a joy which had in it sometimes a touch of pain. For in the old days she had missed much herself, and caused others much needless pain.

But peace and love and happiness reigned at Dalmore and

in the Glen, and the last days were better than the first. Fergus fulfilled all the best promise of his manhood, and became a power for good in the neighbourhood. As for Sheila, she was content. Love was her life's crown.

Husband and wife took many a trip to their Canadian estate, which Fergus left under competent management and so the ties were not severed between the old world and the new.